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# War and Witness in the Poetry of H.D., Denise Levertov, and Carolyn Forche

Katelyn Bienas

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WAR AND WITNESS IN THE POETRY OF H.D., DENISE LEVERTOV, AND  
CAROLYN FORCHE

A Thesis

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts

By

Katelyn Bienas

May 2014

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Katelyn Binas

2014

WAR AND WITNESS IN THE POETRY OF H.D., DENISE LEVERTOV, AND  
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Approved April 11, 2014

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ABSTRACT

WAR AND WITNESS IN THE POETRY OF H.D., DENISE LEVERTOV, AND  
CAROLYN FORCHE

By

Katelyn Bienas

May 2014

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Linda Kinnahan

In my thesis, I focus on the role of the twentieth century female poet in writing about war, looking closely at three poets: H.D., Denise Levertov, and Carolyn Forché. By examining poets from three different points within the century, I question the ways in which the reactions towards these poets evolved alongside society's changing perceptions of women's public responsibilities. Poetry of war is important in documenting events that have a lasting impact upon nations and individuals. However, the role of women poets in writing of these political conflicts is worthy of study because of the questions that arise in terms of gender norms, especially in regards to combat as a subject that is considered to be masculine. Particularly, I focus on how each poet cultivates a speaker's voice, especially in terms of poetic vision.

## DEDICATION

To my parents and my grandparents, who taught me that studying poetry is a worthwhile endeavor.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis would not have been possible without the tireless dedication of my committee members, Linda Kinnahan and Faith Barrett. They carefully guided and encouraged me throughout the project, and through their own enthusiastic commitments to the study of poetry, they modeled for me why this genre matters and what impact it has on the world.

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## Introduction

In her article “‘We have a secret. We are alive’: H.D.’s *Trilogy* as a Response to War,” Sarah Graham writes of “the poet as war correspondent, reporting back from the civilian front line” (162). In this thesis, I examine the female poet as “war correspondent” by questioning how the female voice is viewed within the setting of war as well as how the female poet’s message of war is received within a patriarchal society. War has consistently challenged society’s notions of womanhood, and this is seen within poetry pertaining to war. While many poems discuss the state of women’s lives in wartime, the societal reception of female poets who want to make a statement about war, violence, and nation shows that expectations of female passivity are oftentimes magnified during times of war. From issues of femininity to the family, women’s lives have been studied within the context of war, but women have not always been allowed a voice. There is a large void within the canon of war poetry where women’s writings are largely left out in favor of their male counterparts, who are thought to have more authority in speaking of this traditionally “masculine” subject.

Oftentimes, the questions that arise in looking to female poets within the scope of war literature have to do with the distance from the actual combat of war, something that is imposed by gender-based laws and regulations. In writing about war, there are many questions of authenticity and authority in terms of who has the right to document war, but these questions are made even more pronounced when the poet who is making the statement is a non-combatant. Men, including those who saw combat firsthand, wrote poetry about their wartime experiences during the early decades of the twentieth century.

Women, too, wrote about war, but their work has not been as frequently anthologized or studied. Because of their lack of proximity to the frontlines as well as gender-based assumptions about what topics should interest women, female poets writing about war have faced sharp critical disdain because of what is perceived to be a rejection of the sentiments associated with their gender. Because they are oftentimes ignored within the canon and rarely anthologized for their war related work, these female poets garner less attention than their male counterparts.

When it comes to establishing a canon of war poetry, women have oftentimes been ignored within literary discussions. The earlier wars of the twentieth century led to the inclusion of soldier poets like Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen into the canon, and these men came to embody the spirit of the First World War. Critical challenging of women poet's voices of authority occurred to varying degrees throughout the century, and their poetry was oftentimes taken less seriously as a result. As Susan Schweik notes in "Writing War Poetry Like a Woman" "like the military itself, traditionally the most overtly male of preserves, the canon of the poetry of war presented in recent bibliographies or anthologies is especially and intensely androcentric" (532). While it is true that it is oftentimes men who see combat firsthand, this myopic viewing of men as owning this aspect of the literary canon suggests a limited understanding of war as a global force. Poetry of war should strive to remember more than the experiences on the frontlines of the details of battle. Instead, poetry should act as a force in both protesting war and recollecting how war impacted society beyond the aspects of battle and military strategies.

Because of the limited views of gender pertaining to war poetry, a significant amount of quality work has been overlooked, thus limiting the ways that our culture views war. Schweik writes, “In the modern war poem, as it is usually defined, the experience of the masculine soldier and the voice of the masculine author predominate.” She goes on to trace the assumptions about war poetry that are still in place by examining the traditions that were begun at the beginning of the twentieth century. She also notes that after World War I “the modern tradition of soldier poetry, with its ironic emphasis on un-mendable gaps between the soldier author and the civilian reader, retained its strong influence” (534). These statements bring up questions about what defines the modern war poem. If it is defined as just a poem about combat experience, then the male voice will reign supreme. However, this shows a limited cultural understanding of war. If war extends beyond the battlefield and casts a wide shadow upon individuals and community, then more voices need to be brought in to show both the destructive repercussions and large social changes that are brought about by war.

However, in disqualify the voice of someone who is not writing about firsthand exposures to violence, the literary establishment narrows its discussion about war, instead focusing on a more limited understanding of how war impacts culture, nation, and the individual. When writing about war from a non-combatant perspective, women poets bring a different approach because their work does not focus upon the frontlines and battles. By expanding the definition of credibility when speaking of war to include women, debates about gender and authority arise. Many argue that the gendered notions of war make it so that women have less credibility in discussing the topic, but an

expanded criteria for who can write about war allows for a deepened understanding of the repercussions of violence and political upheaval.

The rejection of female war poets is multifaceted. In writing about war and violence, a female poet seemingly steps away from the characteristics of gentleness and passivity that society expects women to embody. Literature of war oftentimes elicits questions of authenticity, and debates have ensued over how closely affected a person must personally be by a conflict to claim a voice of authority in writing about it. In her landmark anthology *Against Forgetting* Carolyn Forché writes about the idea of poetry of bearing witness, and her anthology is based around carefully and deliberately selected criteria. However, Forché argues that there are different ways of bearing witness, and she herself witnessed the Civil War in El Salvador through her role not as a soldier but as an aid worker. In “What’s the Use? Writing Poetry in Wartime,” Alice Templeton writes “It seems a ‘poetry of witness,’ deriving its authority from the poet’s immediate involvement should be truthful enough to vitalize the reader” (44). However, this statement—and the poetry of the three writers whom I focus upon—brings up questions of what constitutes “immediate involvement.” My thesis argues that “immediate involvement” can be found in the act of writing. By writing about these events, these poets—regardless of their proximity to the actual conflict—are engaged with what is going on, and their work is therefore “truthful enough.”

This thesis examines a small sampling of women who wrote about war, focusing on H.D., Denise Levertov, and Carolyn Forché. While there are many other female poet who would have made worthy studies within this project, these three women were chosen because of their differing approaches to creating voices of authority within their poetics.

By looking at women from a variety of points within the century and varying closeness to actual fighting, the evolving view of female poet in writing about issues traditionally deemed “masculine” becomes evident. Likewise, by writing about poetry of World War I, the Vietnam War, and the Civil War in El Salvador, I hope to show the ways in which ideas of war and gender have evolved and changed within the context of different conflicts. In writing about these political conflicts, which elicited varying degrees of political interest and patriotic responses, I hope to show how women poets were received within different political climates. Likewise, because the twentieth century saw enormous strides for women in terms of gender equality, looking at poets from various points within the century shows how different time periods called for different assurances on the part of the poet in terms of her right to speak.

The poets who I will be discussing all experienced war to varying degrees of involvement and closeness, but none served in the role of combatant. While H.D. lived in England during World War II and therefore experienced the bombings that inspired *Trilogy* firsthand, Denise Levertov (who had seen warfare firsthand as a youth in England during World War II), wrote her Vietnam poems while living in America. Levertov was inspired not by what she was viewing firsthand or by events of which she was a part, but rather by the images of death and destruction that were being presented by the media, as well as by a growing anti-war movement. Likewise, Carolyn Forché did go to El Salvador and viewed atrocities firsthand, but she went as an American looking to assist in another country’s turmoil, thus maintaining her status as outsider.

Beginning my study with H.D., I examine the ways in which she approaches her discussion of the London bombings within the three long poems that make up *Trilogy*.

My analysis of *Trilogy* focuses upon H.D.'s interest in mythical and biblical female figures, and I look at the ways in which she credits these women as a source of her visionary poetics. H.D. shows that she believed herself to possess poetic vision, meaning that she has a divine calling to discuss the bombings. Despite the fact that she witnessed the bombings firsthand, she chooses to talk about the war through a discussion of classical allusions. Additionally, this chapter looks at how H.D.'s speaker "I" works in relation to these classical references and how she asserts her voice as a speaker within the context of her allusions. By looking at the use of particularly female or feminine references, I argue that H.D. worked to establish her credibility as a female poet by demonstrating that her sense of poetic vision extends beyond her contemporary surrounding and the violence that confronts her on a daily basis.

Unlike H.D., Denise Levertov was spatially removed from the Vietnam War, and she relied heavily upon news images in order to understand the extent of the conflict. Her poetry, however, demonstrates an intense sense of empathy towards the Vietnamese people. I argue that Levertov wrote from a consciously female perspective in order to work against the criticism she faced based on her gender, employing a maternal empathy and a gendered voice in her discussion of war. However, I also look at the criticism that Levertov faced because of her gendered voice so that I can examine the poetic establishment in which she was writing. The criticism she faced from respected male poets shows the opposition that was occurring because of gender and war during this time period, even though Levertov was writing during the second wave feminist movement.

Lastly, this thesis looks at Carolyn Forché, focusing both on her poetry written following her time in El Salvador as well as her ideas about poetry of witness. In reading

Forche's poems, I will examine both her representations of the events and the people that she encounters in El Salvador as well as the comparisons that she presents between life there and life in America. By speaking of and to an American audience in these poems, Forche is cognizant of her ability as a poet to convey to her North American contemporaries the message of what is happening in Latin America, and she articulates the responsibility of the poet as spreading the knowledge of suffering to those who are in a position to help.

These three poets are connected not only because of their common subject matter but also because of the ways in which they comment upon poetic vision and assert their own voices of authority. While H.D. and Levertov identify themselves as visionary poets and cite their poetic voices as a divine gift, Forche relies on her own concept of poetry of witness in order to articulate her own need to write of the events she has seen. These women write not only about war, but their poems function as a sort of meta-poetry as they directly comment upon the ways in which poetry should function during times of war and what the duty of the poet is during these challenging times.

While this thesis focuses upon three noteworthy female poets, it is important to note that there are many other equally worthy writers who could not be included because of space, and therefore the issue of gendered self-representations and poetic voices still has much room for study. Likewise, this thesis pertains mainly to the twentieth century, but it is a worthy issue of examination both within earlier centuries as well as into the twenty-first century.

The issues covered within these chapters are fundamental not just to a discussion of war and the literary canon but also in terms of how poetry works in creating an

understanding of human history. If a group of individuals are excluded because of their gender from creating literary remembrances of things that are politically or culturally important, then the cultural remembrance of past events is skewed, and worthwhile perspectives are eliminated. When poets are not given a voice in speaking of war, then our cultural understanding of war becomes limited.

“In the company of the gods”: Allusion and the Divine Female Voice in H.D.’s *Trilogy*

H.D. begins her three volume discussion of World War II by writing of “An incident here and there, / and rails gone (for guns) / from your (and my) old town square” (3). In these opening lines, H.D. sets the stage for her discussion of the war, writing of the “incidents” of the bombings, the guns of warfare, and the ways in which war has affected the community, as seen through the example of the “old town square.” However, *Trilogy* quickly moves away from this realistic representation, almost immediately turning to references seemingly detached from a discussion of twentieth century violence. H.D.’s poetry of World War II, collected in *Trilogy*, presents an abstract, imaginative representation of Britain at war. Instead of directly relaying the events that are unfolding around her, H.D. turns to religious and mythological imagery in order to explain the conditions of wartime London. In connecting these ideas to those of war, H.D. not only shows the interconnectedness of humanity’s sufferings, but she also speaks to her own divinely inspired poetic voice.

Because many of her allusions are to the female, H.D. shows that she, too, enters into a sense of community with the females that have come before her, and in addition to making a statement about the mythical aspects of suffering that war has imposed upon society, she makes a case for the role of the female poet as a mythic, visionary being. H.D. shows that it is because of her poetic vision that she is able to cast the occurrences of the war within the scope of mythology and religion. More importantly, however, it is this sense of vision that allows her to see herself not as limited but rather as empowered

by her gender, and her role as a female poet allows her to feel connected to a sense of female community stretching across time and place.

In order to understand H.D.'s statements about female identity and war poetry, it is important to examine the abstract, unconventional form and content of her poetics, as well as the actual events that inspired her work. In her article "Who Buried H.D.? A Poet, Her Critics, and Her Place in 'The Literary Tradition'" Susan Freidman emphasizes the fact that *Trilogy*, while relatively abstract in nature, directly speaks to the conditions of World War II. Friedman points to the fact that while H.D. was concerned with the realities of the present day, she approached an articulation of these struggles by turning away from realism. The volumes that make up *Trilogy* show not just an understanding of religion and mythology but also of the political and cultural forces that led to a second world war, and Friedman notes "the forces perpetually at work to bring a directionless century to war were a constant preoccupation in her work" (802). However, H.D. addresses these forces by "consciously rejecting the mechanistic, materialistic conceptions of reality that formed the faith of the empirical modern age," and thus also rejecting the hyperrealism of wartime (802). Therefore, it is by turning away from the present age and instead examining classical history that H.D. formulates a poetic argument that truly captures the current moment of World War II.

H.D.'s mark as a poet is in the mythical nature of her work, and this removal from realism allows her to create a sense of tradition and grasp the ways in which history speaks to the conditions of the 1940s. Freidman describes H.D. as "a poet exploring the psyche or soul of humanity" who "reach[es] out to confront the questions of history, tradition, and myth" (802). However, H.D.'s poetry also makes an argument that "history,

tradition, and myth” should not be separated and that the realities of the world can be best expressed by turning away from realism. While *Trilogy* spends little time directly speaking to the conditions of World War II era London or offering to create a depiction of the conditions of the city in flux, H.D. does, as Sarah Graham argues in “‘We have a secret. We are alive’: H.D.’s *Trilogy* as a Response to War,” believe that she is truly presenting her reader with the war as it is occurring. By turning to myth, H.D. does not negate the authenticity of representation. Instead, H.D. believed that through a reading of the text the reader could not just learn about the London bombings, but rather experience them:

H.D. suggests to the readers [...] that what they have experienced is not the war mediated by H.D.’s particular response, but the war itself, with H.D. merely as its conduit. Readers are thus reminded that this poetry is not concerned with conventional notions of speaking to posterity from the enclaves of high art: this is the poet as war correspondent, reporting back from the civilian front line” (162).

Life at war is not “mediated” by the voice of the poet but instead “by the war itself.” H.D., a recipient of poetic vision, does not present her own take on the war but rather serves as a “conduit” for representing the effects of war both in terms of the concrete repercussions of the bombings as well as the effects that the bombings had on human imagination. Additionally, Graham comments upon the nature of H.D.’s poetry and the ways in which the text functions as a commentary upon 1940s Britain. H.D., Graham argues, does not write for “posterity” or to contribute to a poetics of “high art.” Instead,

H.D. writes as a “war correspondent” and her mission is to communicate messages of urgency and the zeitgeist of the time.

The reader, therefore, journeys with H.D. through the channels of a city at war. *Trilogy* intends to make a reader’s experience elevate beyond the page so that he or she can imagine being in the midst of a bitter fight as the bombs fall upon London. “H.D. has initially suggested that, in the awful circumstance of war, she and her audience are of one mind, with H.D. describing what they already understand in a gesture of solidarity,” Graham writes (166). By arguing that H.D. saw herself and her reader as being of “one mind,” Graham shows the communal aspect of H.D.’s poetry, while also demonstrating the relationship that H.D. saw between herself and her reader. Rather than writing as a mode of self-expression, H.D. writes in order to speak to an audience, and the aim of her poetry is to connect with her readers. Graham goes on to stress the importance of the poet being able to talk with the reader through the written word: “The act of communication, its reach, and its survival become, in wartime, a necessity and a new responsibility for the poet” (166). Having spoken to the idea that H.D.’s interests do not reside in creating great art but rather in drawing her reader into dialogue, H.D. herself writes of the universal human experiences, which connect her and her readers, asking within *Trilogy* “what is War / to Birth, to Change, to Death?” (67). Not only does H.D. place war alongside other human experiences, but she also challenges its power over the world, showing it as lesser in terms of other universal experiences while also showing the ways in which its very nature is interwoven with the very things essential to humanity: birth, change, and death.

While *Trilogy* does show an intense effort on H.D.’s part to connect to the reader and to convey her message to her audience, H.D. also experienced a sense of

unsettledness in connection to her readers. This emerged, critics argue, both because of her gender as well as the unconventional nature of her work. “A recurring concern of poets and artists in wartime is their faltering sense of usefulness,” Graham writes, showing that H.D. was not alone in many of her fears (170). Graham goes on to explain that many poets experience “difficulty in continuing to believe in the validity of their own work at a time when aesthetic issues are likely to be overwhelmed by the primitive matter of war” (Graham 170). In responding to the war, however, H.D. is both fearless and incredibly vulnerable, and in her act of speaking of the bombings, she has put herself in a peculiar position. H.D. knows that she needs to react to the war, which causes her to “be so painfully aware of her potentially vulnerable position—daring to respond to the Blitz in poetry rather than engaging in conventional war work—that she must posit an unsympathetic audience against which she can measure herself and assert her right to speak” (Graham 172). Graham is right in identifying poetry as unconventional war work, and *Trilogy* is especially unconventional not just in its departure from the norms of poetic structure but also in its fascination with ideas of womanhood. The unusual nature of this work causes H.D.’s need to “assert her right to speak” as a woman poet and justify her written response to the Blitz. Because of her gender, H.D. automatically embodies a position of doubted credibility, and her war work is far from “conventional” not just because of the nature of the poetics, but also because of her gender. As a result of this, H.D. knows that she will face challenges in gaining the trust of a reader, but she identifies the relationship between the poet and the reader as being of utmost importance.

While acknowledging the lack of association between poetry and conventional war work, Graham also speaks to the idea of H.D. as having an “unsympathetic

audience.” Graham looks back to H.D.’s poetry of World War I, stating “the problematic relationship with her audience is a part of H.D.’s First World War legacy.” (172). World War I was a “period when she feared to be misunderstood by the reader and was unconvinced of her authority as a noncombatant artist to respond to the war in her work” (172). These misunderstandings led to “anxieties, which led her to shape a poetic that communicated intense emotions from a guarded position of hidden meanings” (Graham 172). Graham goes on to speak of the difficult time that World War I was for H.D., showing how the memories of this earlier war lingered in H.D.’s memory as she wrote *Trilogy*. “There is, in fact, a paradox in *Trilogy* that is uniquely war-based: H.D. is simultaneously provoked and disabled by the war because it is an experience that is both utterly new (the unprecedented destruction of the Blitz) and yet horribly reminiscent of the earlier conflict,” Graham writes (173). The memories of World War I, Graham shares, are painful for H.D. to navigate as she writes of World War II, leaving her “once again paralyzed by the same wartime terrors that afflicted her twenty years before” (173). Because of the memories of World War I, H.D.’s voice is undercut and her “confident assertions of the extraordinary insights of the poet are dramatically undercut by her damaged belief in herself as a poet” (Graham 173). Therefore, H.D. uses *Trilogy* not only to comment upon World War II but also to reflect upon her experience during World War I. Her poetry, Graham argues, bears the marks of World War I, especially in terms of how this earlier war made H.D. doubt her voice.

While *Trilogy* speaks to the poet’s desire to connect to the reader and to enter into dialogue with an audience, biographical details of H.D.’s World War II era politics show that she believed strongly in the connection between the intellectual elite and the ordinary

individuals. As Georgina Taylor notes in *H.D. and the Public Sphere of Modernist Women Writers*, H.D.'s work with the Socialist project Mass-Observation strongly influenced her poetics. Mass-Observation, which relied on volunteers (one third of whom were women), was an organization "committed to assembling the facts of everyday existence in this period of crisis, an anthropology of ordinary lives carried out by ordinary people" (Taylor 148). This group strove to move away from both the focus on the individual as well as the distinction between academic and social classes in order to bring the masses and the cultural elite together. While H.D.'s *Trilogy* does not attempt to move away from literary and cultural allusions in order to make her poetry more accessible to the common reader, she instead believes that by including references to these culturally formative texts and traditions she can create a dialogue between herself and her audience. H.D. places great trust in the ordinary individual, and her allusions are meant to unify rather than to divide the poet and the reading public.

Despite her intent to communicate with an ordinary, average audience, H.D.'s academic allusions might make her ways of achieving this mission seem counterproductive. However, by assuming the role as the prophet poet, H.D. aims to help her audience connect with these images by showing them in relation to the facts of the war. While H.D.'s poetry of World War II turns towards classical rather than contemporary allusions and therefore does not always directly comment upon the conditions of the war, *Trilogy* includes references and images of the terrors facing a World War II era Londoner. As Graham notes, "The manipulation of images and language that is an inevitable part of the writing process must be subtle enough for H.D. to maintain the sense that her work is a direct communication of the truth" (170). Martz,

explaining the connections that H.D. saw between the poet and the prophet, writes “it is the spirit of the poet, reborn, reaching out towards the future, predicting its redemption, exulting in the victories of life over death” (xxxv). H.D. wrote in a letter of “the orgy of destruction” that she “witnessed and lived through in London, that outer threat and constant reminder of death” which “drove [her] inward” (qtd. in Barnstone vii). Here, H.D. explains the somewhat distant commentary that she makes regarding the war. While her discussions might seem removed from World War II or even the twentieth century, they are in fact a direct commentary upon the war, because the war has driven her inwards and caused her to seek solace in ancient ideas. Graham speaks to the seemingly removed nature of *Trilogy*, writing “The poetry itself, which advertises an openly discursive response to the war but is actually the most complex work of H.D.’s poetic career, [is] a work that defies immediate comprehension” (162). By speaking of imagery that is not immediately connected to World War II, *Trilogy* may escape “immediate comprehension” and may not seem to immediately connect to the war. However, it is by connecting World War II to ideas of earlier eras that H.D. is able to argue the Second World War’s position within the scope of human history and sufferings, thus showing that it can only be truly comprehended through an understanding of what came before.

While H.D. does demonstrate an immense interest in classical history, mythology, and religion, she also uses *Trilogy* to describe the present moment of the 1940s and to demonstrate the suffering the bombings have imposed upon the British people. However, she uses timeless references in order to illuminate dark aspects of human nature not relevant to the twentieth century alone, but rather to all of human history. Speaking specifically of food and nourishment, H.D. writes “I am hungry, the children call for food

/ and flaming stones fall on them” (39). This lack of food has immediate bearing, she shows, on how the war should be measured: “Let us measure defeat / in terms of bread and meat, / and continents / in relative extent of wheat” (46). The politics of the time or details of battle plans do not interest H.D.; her interest lies in the basic human necessities, things that have remained current across the centuries, thus reflecting her interest in turning back to the classical and Biblical time periods. However, this lack of food concerns her, as do the overall atrocities of wartime, which have had a transformative effect upon the individual: “We have seen how the most amiable, / under physical stress, / become wolves, jackals, / mongrels curs” (47). H.D. acknowledges “we know further than hunger / may make mean hyenas of the best of us” (47). By highlighting the scarcity of resources brought upon by the war, H.D. remarks upon the ways in which war can bring out the worst in human nature and how “physical stress” and hunger can strip away man’s human likeness, instead turning men into “mean hyenas.”

The details of the war are of little interest to H.D., and although she is keenly aware of the bombings, she does not demonstrate an interest in military strategy. Rather, the ways in which violence has permeated human history is an intriguing concept for H.D. She speaks to the prevalence of violence, stating “remember, O Sword, / you are the younger brother, the latter-born, / your Triumph, however exultant, / must one day be over” (17). Susan Gubar, in her article “The Echoing Spell of H.D.’s ‘Trilogy,’” writes of the impact that the Sword has over H.D.: “The poet is especially vulnerable in a world that worships coercion, for the sword takes precedence over the word” (Gubar 199). The Sword—and the violence, destruction, and depravity that come along with it—may be currently reigning, but H.D. reminds the sword that both its time and its power are

limited. The Sword is the “younger brother, the latter-born” and therefore does not rank supreme. While the world does, as Gubar argues, venerate coercion and violence, H.D. refutes the power of the Sword, claiming that poetry is actually the stronger force. She follows her warning to the Sword that its reign “must one day be over” by harkening back to a Biblical reference, making a reference to the Gospel of John, and writing that “*in the beginning / was the word*” (17). While in this reference the Word as it is used in John’s Gospel refers to the coming of Christ, H.D. also uses *Trilogy* to speak to the power of the word in the literary sense, but especially in terms of poetry. While the effects of violence might be readily seen in 1940s London, it is the word, H.D. shows, that has had the biggest influence over world history.

It is books, poetry, and the written word, *Trilogy* argues, that have the power to counteract the atrocities of war. Barnstone writes that H.D. intended *Trilogy* as “a book of hope, a book of life, and a scripture for a new religion” (viii) because the book “asserts the power of the word over the sword” (viii). While cities and civilizations are being threatened during the war, the destruction of books speaks to the loss of art and culture in the midst of the bombings. “[O]ur books are a floor / of smouldering ash under our feet,” H.D. writes (16). The action of destroying books and, consequently, culture, speaks to the depravity of war: “though the burning of the books remains / the most perverse gesture / and the meanest / of man’s mean nature, / yet give us, they still cry, / give us books” (16). In these lines, H.D. is explicit in the value that she is placing upon the word. Even within the scope of atrocities occurring throughout World War II (as well as those that have taken places across the course of human history), the destruction of the book is “the most perverse gesture.” Likewise, H.D. shows that individuals recognize the depravity of this

destruction, as the people cry, “give us books.” However, the irony, which is a “bitter truth,” is the reason that people want these books. H.D. explicitly connects books to weapons when she speaks of how “folio, manuscript, old parchment / will do for cartridge cases” (16). Here, H.D. shows the ways in which the Sword has corrupted the word while also showing the power that is embedded within the written word. Because of this culture of violence, the book is no longer simply appreciated for the complexity of its words. The people have, however, realized that the word can fight against violence and injustice, which is what H.D. attempts to do with her poetry. Folios and manuscripts are strong weapons against the forces of war, and they contain messages just as strong as the ones that accompany the bombs being dropped upon London. *Trilogy* shows that H.D. was aware of the power of words in shaping ideas as well as her poet’s ability to use words in non-traditional ways or to create unconventional images. As a poet, words are essential to her being, and as a female writing about war, H.D. uses her words and the allusions and references that they entail to challenge not just ideas of gender but to also challenge a myopic understanding of World War II.

While H.D. sees the written word as being of great importance, it is poetry that she assigns the greatest value within the scope of the literary tradition. “She has high ambitions for the poetry as a universal healing and regenerative force,” Barnstone states (xiv). As a poet and a civilian, H.D. does not have actual weapons, but her poetry gives her the power to fight against the war. While there may appear to be little place for a poet and her work in wartime, she counteracts this thought by remarking “we fight for life, / we fight, they say, for breath” (17). Just as the soldiers are fighting, so too is the poet, whose work serves as more than entertainment but rather a method of survival. Likewise,

H.D. answers the question of “what good are your scribblings?” (17). In this question, H.D. takes the voice of those who demean poetry or who see it as lacking true power, something that is seen through the equivocation of poetry with mere “scribblings.” These scribblings, H.D. shows, transcend the limits of the world as “we take them with us / beyond death.” She goes on to explain that “papyrus or parchment / are magic, indelibly stamped / on the atmosphere somewhere, / forever” (17). Refuting the claims of those who find poetry to be an unnecessary luxury, H.D. shows that poetry is “magic” that remains “indelibly stamped” on the “atmosphere somewhere.” Just as war is an ever-present legacy within human history, so is poetry, which allows individuals to transcend the barrier of violence and suffering.

A discussion of writing—and especially of the female writer—is central to of *Trilogy*, and H.D. is clear in her identification of the female as a powerful being. In section two of “The Walls Do Not Fall” H.D. speaks of Isis, Aset, and Astarte before remarking, “Your stylus is dripped in corrosive sublimate” and then asking “how can you scratch out / indelible ink of the palimpsest / of past misadventure?” (6). By harkening back to these female figures of mythology, H.D. shows that her position as a twentieth century poet is rooted in past tradition and she therefore assigns credibility to her own role as poet. The figures of mythology—particularly the women— are important to H.D., who is out of sorts within the society of World War II era Britain. H.D. writes, “When I was in the company of the gods, / I loved and was loved” (10). In this classical tradition, H.D. has found a sense of purpose in expressing and feeling love, and the “company of the gods” has given her the words needed to express her feelings concerning the war.

In addition to the gods of mythology, H.D. also speaks of the traditional Judeo-Christian God, writing “I am yet unrepentant, / for I know the Lord God / is about to manifest, when I, / the industrious worm, / spin my own shroud” (12). That “the Lord God” will “manifest” when she takes on an action—in this case, spinning her own shroud—shows that H.D. feels a connection and kinship to the divine. H.D. sees herself as being the recipient of divine vision, but she has received this vision from a multitude of sources. Rather than simply connecting her poetic vision to the Judeo-Christian tradition, H.D. shows that her sense of poetic vision is multifaceted and has been bestowed upon her by a variety of influences. By looking at an alternative understanding of world history—one in which the female plays a greater role—H.D. proposes a different approach to seeing the current events of World War II. Just as she does in her move away from realism, H.D.’s focus on the female historical figure works to challenge the reader’s understanding of the world as it seems to appear. In connecting her poetic voice to the divine, H.D. not only demonstrates a sense of authority as a poet, but she shows that the divine is not something solely connected with masculinity, and she proposes a different understanding of both human history and the poetic tradition.

Throughout *Trilogy*, H.D. demonstrates a realization of the limited perceptions of the poet within contemporary society. The poet, she realizes, is no longer the esteemed figure of the classical age. H.D. speaks to the role of the poet in section eight of “The Walls Do Not Fall.” Commenting upon the perception of the poet—especially the perception of those who place their faith in the Sword—H.D. writes “Poets are useless, / more than that, / we, authentic relic, / bearers of the secret wisdom, / living remnant / of the inner band / of the sanctuaries’ intimate, / are not only ‘non-utilitarian’, / we are

‘pathetic’” (14). In these lines, H.D. shows the limitations of society’s values. The poet is the “bearer of the secret wisdom” while also being “useless” and “pathetic,” thus showing that the twentieth century world places little value on the gifts the poet offers. While H.D. does acknowledge the less than favorable perceptions of the poet, she quickly transitions to a discussion of the poet’s importance, writing that “if you do not even understand what words say, / how can you expect to pass judgment / on what words conceal?” (14). Words, she shows, are essential to society, as is the understanding of them, and she cautions against “passing judgment” upon the poet.

H.D. demonstrates that the poet, who has been entrusted with a special, divine vision, has a unique insight into the conditions of the war. This vision, she shows, has come from a higher power, and thus the poet can see what the ordinary civilian cannot. In her poetry, H.D. is both speaking from a divinely appointed source while also locating the divine within the everyday: “I am seeking heaven; / yours has no vision, / I see what is beneath me, what is above me” (121). Others have no vision, as H.D. notes in these lines, but she is “seeking heaven” and has the power to see both what is above and what is below her, allowing her to observe more than just the simple occurrence unfolding in plan view. Not only does H.D. have the vision to see beyond the sphere of normal sight, she is also able to see through the boundaries of history. Therefore, her perception of World War II—and specifically the London bombings—is multifaceted, and she speaks of the current situation within a discussion of past events and ideas.

In *Notes on Thought and Vision* H.D. explains how she herself perceives vision. Although *Notes* is a text from significantly earlier in H.D.’s career, it demonstrates how her reasoning, as found within this text, reflects the discussions of vision found within

*Trilogy*. H.D. explains how the truly visionary artist allows her audience to “look through a window in the world of pure over-mind” (18). Therefore, the visionary artist provides the reader or viewer with a sense of transcendence. H.D. goes on to describe herself as a visionary poet by writing of her own “over-mind,” which she describes as affecting her sight: “It seems to me that a cap is over my head, a cap of consciousness over my head, my forehead, affecting a little my eyes” (18). This affect of this “over-mind” upon her perception of the present moment does not skew her ability to grasp reality. Rather, it provides her with an additional sight. She remarks, “Ordinary things never become quite unreal nor disproportionate” (18). Instead it takes a “slight physical effort” to “readjust, to focus” in order to solidify or sharpen her vision (18). By expressing the nuances that she sees as effecting her own sense of vision, H.D. is clear in showing how she is able to share this vision with her reader while also remaining firm in her belief she has been entrusted with a special sense of the divine.

While visionary poetics as a tradition extends back into history long before H.D.’s time and is associated with many male poets, H.D. makes an argument for a particularly female type of vision. She explains that “Vision is of two kinds—vision of the womb and vision of the brain,” stressing that the ability to bear children gives women a special insight into the divine (20). Reflecting on her own life, H.D. writes that her most intense state of vision came right before the birth of her first child (20). Likewise, H.D. goes on to explain, “the majority of dream and of ordinary vision is vision of the womb” (21). If an element of vision is “of the womb” and if H.D. connects her own poetic vision to her experiences in childbirth, then the female poet has an increased sense of vision, and the female poet should be an exalted figure. Just as H.D. writes of a particularly female type

of vision, *Trilogy* shows that she is particularly interested in the female poet. Freidman notes that H.D.'s concern with the female: "She was a woman, who wrote about women, and all the ever-questioning artistic, intellectual heroes of her epic poetry and novels were women" (803). Freidman adds that "in the quest poetry and fiction of the established literary tradition (particularly the poetic tradition), women as active, thinking, individual human beings rarely existed" (803). While a reading of *Trilogy* shows that H.D. was intensely interested in women as literary figures and voices, Freidman shows that she was also writing in response to a true lack of strong female voices within the literary tradition.

In reading H.D.'s intense concern for the female vision, one must acknowledge the literary tradition from which she emerged and was surrounded by. Freidman discusses the representations of women found in the long poems of H.D.'s contemporaries: writers like Pound, Williams, and Eliot, who wrote long, epic poems, just as H.D. did. The representations of women within Pound's *Cantos*, William's *Patterson*, and Eliot's *The Wasteland*, are deeply problematic, Freidman argues:

They [women] are the static, symbolic objects of quest, not the questers; they are 'feminine principles,' both threatening and life giving, and not particularized human beings. Women are dehumanized, while the quest of the male poet is presented and understood as the anguished journey of the prophet-seer for the absolute on behalf of all humankind. For "mankind" they may be the spokesmen, but for "womankind" they are not. As a woman writing about women, H.D. explored the untold half of the human story, and by that act she set herself outside of the established tradition (803).

While the long poems by Eliot, Pound, and Williams are among the best-known works of the modernist age, Freidman shows that they are lacking in their gender representations, and she argues that H.D. uses *Trilogy* to challenge these limitations. As H.D. looks to historical female figures—among them, the goddesses of mythology and the Virgin Mary—as the voices of knowledge, she makes an argument for “womankind,” a group ignored in many other poems of the modernist age. Therefore, it is not only H.D.’s imaginative approach to poetic form or unconventional take on history and religion that makes *Trilogy* a revolutionary text, but it is also a surprising volume because of the ways in which she removes herself from the “established tradition.”

H.D. shows that it is because of her poetic vision that she is able to transcend the boundaries of the assignment of “woman poet” and instead speak to the suffering and the violence of the war as well as any of her male contemporaries. As a poet, H.D. has been granted vision, which is paramount in terms of her discussion of the war. In section eleven of “The Walls Do Not Fall” H.D. states “without idea sand the Word’s meditation, / you would have remained / unmanifest in the dim dimension / where thought dwells” (18). The poet resides in a place “where thought dwells” away from the pressures of the world but still able to speak of the common occurrences of life. It is the “Word’s meditation” that allows the poet to write of everyday life, therefore showing that it is the Word that inspires the poet, not the poet who controls the Word. H.D. closes this section with the lines “Dream, / Vision” (18). By ending with “Vision,” H.D. shows the great importance of visionary poetics, while also claiming her position within the sphere of visionary poets. It is her vision that allows her to write, and her authority as a poetic voice resides within this vision.

The poet, H.D. shows, is a complicated but important figure. Speaking of the visionary being, H.D. writes that “we are the keepers of the secret, / the carriers, the spinners / of the rare intangible thread / that binds all humanity / to ancient wisdom, to antiquity” (24). Here, H.D. shows the great power that has been entrusted to the visionary poet, who is not just “the keeper of the secret” but also the person who “binds all humanity.” The poet, she explains, connects the twentieth century to the age of “ancient wisdom, to antiquity,” just as she herself does in her poetry. But speaking to religion, history, and mythology, H.D. shows that the modern individual is not isolated within his contemporary age; rather, the aspects of his life connect back to an earlier age, just as the terrors of World War II are not isolated within the span of the twentieth century but rather speak to the sufferings of the past two thousand years.

H.D. continues this discussion by writing that of the commonalities shared by visionaries not just in the present moment but also across time. “Our joy is unique, to us, / grape, knife, cup, wheat / are symbols in eternity, / and every concrete object / has abstract value, is timeless” (24). These objects are timeless “in the dream parallel / whose relative sigil has not changed / since Nineveh and Babel” (24). By assigning a magical value to the common objects of “grape, knife, cup, wheat” H.D. shows that the poet has a vision to understand the significance of everyday objects. Likewise, the poet’s vision allows her to see “the dream parallel”—the space occurring alongside the everyday but carrying increased significance.” The visionary poet experiences a “joy unique” thus demonstrating the fact that the poet is able to see things invisible to the average person. However, H.D. does not argue that the visionary poet must be de-gendered, and *Trilogy*

shows how her female identity (and her feelings of kinship with female figures from the Bible and mythology) acts as a source of her divine inspiration.

Barnstone acknowledges the fact that H.D. truly believed in the power of the visionary poet, as well as the importance of the written word. “Her poem, she implies, is an incarnation of God’s words, showing the path,” Barnstone writes (vii). She continues, stating “She asks the reader to venerate both her voice and the figure of Woman as poet, mystical seer, and god” (vii) The war, Barnstone writes, only increased the strength of H.D.’s vision: “While the German planes roared overhead, bombs falling, she heard a more powerful voice” (viii) “As the scribe or the transcriber of the writing-on-the wall, or the hieroglyphics of the dream, the poet has a special sight,” she continues (Barnstone xii). However, the poet does not stand apart from the average, everyday reader, and instead communicates messages that resonate with the common individual. Barnstone writes that “poets speak a universal language that is the hope of humanity,” thus stressing the idea that poetry can be a source of hope for a society in crisis (Barnstone xii) Likewise, Martz stresses the point that H.D. creates poetry out a very real sense of urgent need: “She writes because she has been privileged to witness an apocalyptic scene of war in the heavens such as no earlier generation has seen” (Martz xxxiii). While H.D. draws from the visions of earlier generations, her visionary poetics comes from the nature of what is unfolding in front of her, and she is both called and “privileged” to write of the war.

H.D.’s perception of herself as a visionary poet as well as the visionary nature of her work is central to *Trilogy*. In embarking upon a challenging and unconventional project relating to World War II, H.D. takes a topic that was consuming society’s every

thought, but she approaches it through a non-traditional lens, seemingly writing more about history, literary, and biblical allusions than the war itself. However, in approaching the war from an unexpected standpoint, H.D. demonstrates that the foundation of the war is more than meets the eye; rather, the war connects back to violence that has reached across centuries. As a visionary poet, H.D. sees herself as the one necessary to bring this message to her reader, and her poetry shows that she feels divinely called in her role as poet to transmit these messages of universality, tradition, and war. Because she believes so confidently in her divinely appointed role as poet, H.D. is able to overcome the prejudices relating to her gender in order to challenge traditional understandings of war.

“My poet’s sight I was given”: Gender and Authority in Denise Levertov’s  
Vietnam Poems

Best known for being explicitly anti-war, Denise Levertov’s Vietnam era poems do not shy away from issues of gender or from including details representative of the poet’s own life or experience as a woman. Levertov was oftentimes sharply criticized for her frank assessment of war and doubted as a voice of authority because of her position as a woman without direct exposure to the frontlines. However, Levertov believed that she possessed poetic sight, which called her to poetry and bestowed upon her a divine gift. What is even more pronounced, however, is that she believed her poetic sight to be connected to her gender; rather than writing about war in spite of her gender, her poetry shows that she felt compelled as a woman to combine a maternal empathy with her discussion of the individuals who were suffering half a world away.

While much of Levertov’s poetry appears to be about the societal ills caused by the Vietnam War, Levertov’s sense of her own identity and perception of self is also paramount within her poems, and which is seen through Levertov’s decisions about how to portray herself on the page. As Rachel Blau duPlessis argues in “The Critique of Consciousness and Myth in Levertov, Rich, Rukeyser” Levertov’s poems are as much about internal issues—especially the creation and recreation of self—as they are about external happenings. While there is a vast canon of poetry in which poets discuss the wars sans an extensive look inward towards their own psyches, Levertov herself remains a constant presence within her work, and she functions as both the speaker as well as a character navigating the rough terrain of modern life. At the same time, Levertov argues for her own authority as a female writer commenting upon the decidedly male topic of

war. Therefore, Levertov herself acts as a character in a narrative that she is forming as a vehicle for social protest. By representing herself in a decidedly gendered narrative, she is creating an argument in support of her authority and credibility as a female poet who is challenging gender norms.

In her Vietnam era poetry, Levertov demonstrates that she feels called to write against the war, but she also shows an awareness of the need to address issues of gender within her poetry, something that is reflective of the pressures and stereotypes frequently facing women poets. Blau duPlessis speaks of female poets' struggles with gender stereotypes—especially those wishing to write about topics not deemed feminine—in the essay “The Pink Guitar.” DuPlessis writes that a woman writer “is marked by the cultural attributes of Woman, gender, sexuality, the feminine, a whole bolus of contradictory representations which are as much her cultural inscriptions as ours. She is marked by being variously distinguished—defined, singled out—by her gender” (“The Pink” 161). If a woman poet is “marked by the cultural attributes of Woman,” then her writing will—regardless of the topic—be “distinguished [...] by her gender” rather than by content and form. DuPlessis goes on to add that the female poet “is marked by some unevenly effective traditions of both ‘unspeaking’ and ‘unspeakable’ female self, and by some also uneven sets of incentives to cultural production, although she may be many things” (“The Pink” 161).

Levertov's poetry shows a yearning on the part of the poet to “be many things” at once—to exemplify the empathetic, nurturing characteristics associated with her gender while also writing about violence and war, and her poems work to combine the two in a way that allows for her to assume both a conventional and a revolutionary stance. This

question of self-representation on the part of the poet—something that Levertov’s poetry extensively engages with—is echoed by DuPlessis in her essay:

For any woman, and especially for a cultural producer, a vital question is how to imagine herself, and how to imagine women, gender, sexualities, men and her own interests when the world of images, and indeed, basic structure of thought have been filled to overflowing with representations of her, and displacement of any ‘her’ by the representations others make. Thus: how to create an adequate work Of and About women (but never exclusively of or about women), while being By a woman, when strata of previous images of women, some quite culturally precious, suffuse and define culture, consciousness, and individual imagination. (“The Pink” 161)

Levertov—like any writer belonging to a marginalized group—is not granted complete autonomy in how she presents herself on the page. As a woman, she is part of “representations others make”—representations and expectations that are centuries old. As DuPlessis argues, it is difficult for her to divorce herself from the “strata of previous images of woman” when they have always been present within the world around her. However, as a cultural producer, Levertov is granted the ability to purposefully craft representations of herself. Levertov’s poetry exhibits deliberate attempts to formulate an image of the poet herself as someone who embraces aspects of her gender while also eschewing ideas that women are not authorities on the topic of war.

Most of the pressures that Levertov faced in terms of representing herself as both a gendered being and political commentator—as exemplified by DuPlessis’s comments—

came from the literary tradition of her day, especially from older, male poets. Although poets like George Oppen, Robert Duncan, and Louis Zukofsky were writers whom Levertov admired and was friendly with, she oftentimes found herself facing criticism from them in regards to her gender and the subjects about which she wrote. As Donna Krolick Hollenberg writes in her biography of Levertov, *A Poet's Revolution*, professional problems with Zukofsky illuminated larger issues such as “Levertov’s problems with the role of female acolyte in what was then still a predominantly male milieu” (181). While Zukofsky’s criticism is more of the literary establishment than of Levertov herself, Oppen took a patriarchal stance when discussing Levertov, assuming an air of masculine superiority when speaking of this younger, female poet.

In the article “‘Feminine Technologies’: George Oppen Talks at Denise Levertov,” Burton Hatlen highlights many of the issues that arose from Oppen’s perception of Levertov as a woman and as a poet. Hatlen quotes from a 1962 letter in which Oppen writes of Levertov as being “determined to be (or become) a good mother, to enter political (anti-bomb, at least) activity,” thus speaking to the perceptions of the time that a woman’s political statement must be rooted in her role as mother (9). Hatlen moves beyond speculation and instead makes a resolved statement regarding Oppen’s thoughts on Levertov. Oppen, Hatlen writes, was “very uneasy about some tendencies that he saw in Levertov’s work. In part this uneasiness stemmed simply from the fact that she was a woman” (9).

The idea that “some tendencies” should not appear in the works of female poets demonstrates deeply patriarchal sentiments that were vocalized not only by Oppen but also by other male poets, such as Robert Duncan, who believed that Levertov was

speaking out not to decry the war, but rather to make a statement about gender. Speaking of Levertov's Vietnam poems, Duncan remarked that they "are not to be read properly in relation to Vietnam... but in relation to the deep underlying consciousness of the woman as a victim in war with the Man" (Hollenberg 284). While Hollenberg's statement that Levertov was writing within a "predominantly male milieu" is accurate, Duncan's observation undermines the poet's voice. By remarking that Levertov was so impacted by her desire to rebel against the male establishment that this gender protest eclipses a political protest, Duncan negates what Levertov saw as the purpose of these politicized works, and her readers would not see her poetry as making a clear statement against the war. Likewise, if the reader understands the poet speaker as presenting herself as a victim, then her messages of suffering and empathy and her call for peace are merely a front for a discussion of a victimhood caused by the very nature of her being. These sorts of statements pronounced by well-respected, established poets like Duncan and Oppen show the prejudices that Levertov found herself writing against, and these claims that her war writing was limited by her gender demonstrate the motivations behind her representation of herself as a poet divinely appointed to write of injustices.

The vast majority of Levertov's Vietnam era poems clearly feature a speaker's voice that does not strive to be genderless, which is key to her representation of herself as both a female and a political poet while also connecting to earlier twentieth century ideas about women and war. Speaking of the literature of the first World War, Margaret Higonnet observes that "war as a force of globalization at once unifies women who mourn their losses by drawing on traditionally assigned roles and forms" (120). Although Higonnet does not directly speak about Levertov's era, this statement nonetheless relates

to Levertov's Vietnam poetry, which at once conforms to and rebels against Higonnet's observation, because while Levertov does not shy away from political activism, she also represents herself as a woman embodying conventional roles.

Levertov complies with a "traditionally assigned role" within her poetry—that of the mother—but she uses this position to further her credibility, rather than employing it as a culturally acceptable role to hide behind. By adopting the gendered voice of the mother but doing so on her own terms in a way that still allows her poem political undertones, Levertov speaks in a way that allows this role to serve as a source of inspiration rather than a limitation. Levertov eschews politically controversial subject matter by instead playing into ideas of the "traditionally assigned role" in "He-Who-Came-Forth," a poem in which she charts the growth of her son from conception to maturation. However, this poem does not merely recount the first twenty years of her son's life. Rather, Levertov is focusing on his beginnings as a part of her own body and his later position as an adult "out in the world" (12). Through this poem, which reads like a tribute to the joys and sorrows of motherhood, Levertov works to establish the connections between her gendered role as a mother and her chosen role as a poet speaking against the war.

In "He-Who-Came-Forth" Levertov is able to create a bridge between the self who is in line with society's expectations (the mother) with the self rebelling against conventionally held gender norms (the female war poet). Levertov oftentimes found herself criticized as a political poet not just because of her gender, but also because of her lack of firsthand wartime experience as well as her physical, cultural, and economic distance from the Vietnamese people. In her discussion of the separation between herself

and her son, Levertov crafts an argument about the inherent closeness and alienation between all of humanity. Levertov begins the poem by remarking “Somehow nineteen years ago / clumsily passionate / I drew into me the seed / of a man / and bore it, cast it out” (1-5).

Within the same breath of the verse, however, Levertov charts her son’s growth into an individual who “now stands beyond” his mother (11). In the span of the poem’s single sentence, Levertov examines the powerful relationship between a mother and a child, and she writes of how the strong bonds of this relationship give way to a profound gulf of separation as the child asserts his independence. Within this poem, feelings of unity and of alienation exist simultaneously, and while “He-Who-Came-Forth” shows Levertov’s personal views relating to motherhood, the poem also offers a larger message relating to the closeness or lack thereof within human relationships. Levertov ends with the observation of her son as “beautiful and strange as if / I had given birth to a tree” (14-15). Their relationship has become distant, but Levertov’s feelings towards her son are still powerful. This poem sets the stage for an understanding of her intimate viewings of the Vietnamese people despite only knowing them from media portrayals and her own empathetic imagination.

Levertov shows the nuances of her relationship with her son while also demonstrating the connection that she believes she feels to the Vietnamese people. Through her poetry, Levertov is able to craft an understanding of these foreign people because, as Lorrie Smith remarks, Levertov believed that “poetry is a way of constructing autonomous existences out of words and silences” (214). Therefore, through her diction, the poet has been given the power to conjure the feelings and experiences of people who

have “autonomous existences.” The idea of connections between people is apparent within Levertov’s Vietnam poems—the most noteworthy examples being “Life at War,” “What Were They Like?” and “Advent 1966”— which show the poet’s desire to understand the Vietnamese people by imagining the splintering of their lives because of the war. In the same way that her son becomes detached from her own being within “He-Who-Came-Forth,” Levertov is removed both geographically and culturally from people in Vietnam. These foreign individuals are truly “out in the world,” but although they are not her immediate neighbors, she still feels a sense of kinship with them (11).

While Levertov is starting from a point where she is embracing the traditional role of the mother, she is using this beginning point to establish her credibility and craft her presentation of the Vietnamese in a way that allows her to achieve her ultimate goal—to write against the war. Just as Levertov sees her son’s need to be a separate individual while nonetheless still caring for him as she did when he was a part of her own being, her poetry crafts an image of a poet who recognizes the humanity of the people who the American government were, in her view, unfairly and mercilessly killing, and this shared humanity trumps the alienation stemming from the differences in their nationalities. As Smith states, Levertov understood the “political implications of personal life,” and this is reflected in her desire to write both personal and political works (214). Smith continues, remarking “though ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ are painfully separate in Levertov’s fallen world, they are also paradoxically united because one person suffers and records the dissonance” (218). Within Levertov’s poetry, Vietnam would be considered the “outer” while her family would be considered “inner.” However, as her body of work shows, she does not differentiate between the two or assign them different significances.

To Levertov, the bittersweet act of a child moving away from his mother into a life of his own is a universal experience, and the gulf between parent and growing child is just as significant and important as political commentary. Although DuPlessis states that Levertov “construct[s] critiques of culture and ideology from a radical and oftentimes feminist point of view” it is her embracing of essentially non-radical aspects of her life that allow her to hone her voice as she prepares to create truly radical and politically charged poetry (280). Levertov’s “feminist point of view” does not necessarily mean a rejection of the conventional portrayals of womanhood but rather a revision of its traditional representation. By using aspects of her inner life—specifically those relating to motherhood—the poet demonstrates her authority in critiquing the outer world, something that she approaches through a discussion of the self-sacrificing aspects of motherhood.

The poet represents herself as encompassing many different spheres, and this self-representation speaks to her authority in writing of both family life and political issues. Levertov’s combination of the personal and the political takes on added meaning in a time of war, something that can be viewed through an understanding of Carolyn Forché’s articulation of the concept of “the social.” Observing the limits of simply seeing poetry only within the constructs of personal and political, Forché proposes seeing the social as “the sphere in which claims against the political order are made in the name of justice” (9). Forché’s further explanation of the social is one that adds a new perspective to both the validity and the importance of Levertov’s Vietnam poems, as well as to Levertov’s sense of being called to write about the war. “The poem might be our only evidence that an event has occurred: it exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence,” Forché argues,

adding that “As such, there is nothing for us to base the poem on, no independent account that will tell us whether or not we can see a given text as being ‘objectively’ true. Poem as trace, poem as evidence” (9).

The idea of poems as “trace” and “evidence” can be seen through Levertov’s desire to capture the simple nuances of the Vietnamese people’s lives. Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller support Forche’s argument concerning separate spheres in the book *Feminist Measures*: “The interplay of lyric and narrative poetry and prose mimics the intersection of public and private; both discourses are necessary for the poet’s self-as-revolutionary” (CITE). Therefore, by showing that she inhabits two separate spaces, Levertov is making an argument for her strength as a poet. If “both discourses are necessary” then Levertov has a duty to portray herself as understanding the importance of balancing her interior life and thoughts with the realities of the world around her. Levertov does not claim to be an authority on the political or military tactics of the war—her interest lies only in observing and recounting human suffering—but her empathetic stance gives her poetry a strong credibility because her poetics rely so strongly on the universal truths of emotions and sufferings.

The idea of “the social” is exemplified through the poem “Life at War,” which stresses the poet’s belief in community and empathy. In this poem, Levertov speaks of the communal “we” in her discussion of shared notions of humanity and suffering, illustrating the fact that even though she does not live in Vietnam, she—along with her Western contemporaries—is still experiencing life at war. War, she argues, affects everyone, not just those directly in the line of fire. Americans, although removed from the war, still feel the pains of war within their own bodies. Levertov grounds “Life at

War” in a discussion of body imagery (echoing the imagery of “He-Who-Came-Forth”), and she channels her discussion of war through its effects on the physical being.

Levertov begins the poem by showing that she is a part of the communal group by utilizing inclusive language in her first line, in which she remarks “The disaster numbs within us” (1). This disaster is “caught in the chest, rolling / in the brain like pebbles” (2-3). Levertov crafts the image of disaster being “balled into / formless lumps” that the individual must carry with him or herself at all times (9-10). The effects of disaster do in fact manifest themselves internally: “We have breathed the grits of it in, all our lives, / our lungs are pocketed with it, / the mucous membrane of our dreams” (14-16). Therefore, war is not simply a collection of external actions happening in a different part of the globe. Levertov argues that no matter how detached America and Vietnam might seem, Westerners—herself included—have still “breathed” in the toxic effects of the war. As a mother and as someone aware of the body’s ability to give life (an idea apparent within “He-Who-Came-Forth”), Levertov demonstrates her ability to use her own experiences to understand the magnitude of sadness that accompanies the loss of human life.

While Levertov did not directly experience the horrors of battle, she chooses within “Life at War” to include herself in groupings made up primarily of suffering Vietnamese people rather than to portray herself as a privileged Westerner, thus showing that she feels akin to those individuals experiencing the horrors of war. Levertov parallels the effects of war on the body of the individual who is not directly touched by violence—a group that she includes herself in through the use of the “we”—with images of individuals who were being physically harmed in Vietnam. Bodies act as the

commonality between Americans and the other, and Levertov writes of the “delicate man, whose flesh / responds to a caress, whose eyes / are flowers that perceived stars” but whose life is being destroyed by the realities of war (20-22). By speaking of the other’s ability to feel pleasure and “respond to a caress” as well as the other’s ability to see the beauty in the stars, Levertov argues that the Vietnamese people were more multi-faceted than the images of them that were presented to Americans through the media.

However, Levertov not only discusses the idea of the other but also dismisses it through her erasing of boundaries and emphasis on shared humanity. Supporting DuPlessis’s argument that “[o]therness’ is a cultural construct like the ‘the feminine’” Levertov’s poetry works to eliminate divisions of all kinds, not only in terms of ethnic and geographic separations but also in terms of the gender divides that led many in the establishment to doubt her role as a poet speaking from a clearly gendered voice (“The Pink” 165). By capturing their ability to engage in simple yet important aspects of life, Levertov shows that the Vietnamese people encompass more aspects of the human condition than just suffering and death—the only aspects of their lives being conveyed by the American media. Levertov juxtaposes this image of beauty with the images that Americans were being exposed to on their televisions, those of an “implosion of skinned penises into carcass-gulleys” (31) and “burned human flesh” (38). By setting images of bodies in moments of simplicity and pleasure alongside images of bodies literally being destroyed, “Life at War” furthers the idea that atrocities were being performed against a group of people not unlike Americans.

At the center of Levertov’s use of body imagery is an idea of empathy, and by casting herself as an empathetic individual—as seen through her speaker’s voice—she

utilizes the universality of human bodies to show that the people of Vietnam are not the other. “These acts are done / to our own flesh; burned human flesh is burning in Vietnam as I write,” Levertov states (37-39). The quick transition from “our own flesh”—the flesh of the privileged American—to the notion of the flesh that was being burned in Vietnam is used to blur the lines between the American and the other and to elicit ideas of community. The poem contains a direct plea that “We are the humans, men who can make; whose language imagines *mercy, / lovingkindness*; we have believed one another / mirrored forms of a God we felt as good— / who do these acts, who convince ourselves / it is necessary” (32-35). Westerners have, Levertov argues, the capabilities within themselves and within their language to imagine and speak of mercy, yet mercy is not being shown to the people of Vietnam because Americans have convinced themselves “it is necessary” to kill innocent people in times of war. If humans are, as Levertov states, “mirrored forms of God,” then there cannot be differences between the Americans and Vietnamese, and Westerners cannot feel superior to “the other.”

While “Life at War” makes an argument about the interconnectedness of all of humanity, Levertov uses “Advent 1966” not only to speak of the sufferings occurring in Vietnam but also to write of her poetic sight and of her role as a poet. Levertov sees vision as instrumental to her poetry and as embedding within her poetry aspects of the divine. Hollenberg’s biography quotes Levertov as stating that “the poet—when he is writing—is priest; the poem is a temple; epiphanies and communion take place within it. The communion is triple: between the maker and the needer within the poet; between the maker and the needer outside him... and between the human and the divine in both poet and reader” (167). The divine, according to Levertov, is “vast, irreducible, a spirit

summoned by the exercise of needing and making,” and poetry bridges the connections to the divine by allowing the writer and the reader to form “their own dialogue with the god in themselves” (Hollenberg 167). If Levertov has been a recipient of poetic sight—an idea reaching back to the earliest days of written poetry—then critiques against her poetry based on perceived limitations of her gender are unfounded.

Focusing almost exclusively on ideas of things that can be seen, Levertov is able to transition from the images she is absorbing in the media to the vision that she has received as a poet. Levertov begins “Advent 1966” by remarking, “Because in Vietnam the vision of the Burning Babe / is multiplied, multiplied / the flesh on fire” (1-3). It is the image of “infant after infant, their names forgotten / their sex unknown in the ashes” that has embedded itself in Levertov’s consciousness (6-7). Again, she draws from the idea of sight when she speaks of these infants “flaming, but not vanishing, / not vanishing as his vision but lingering” (8-9). While she does locate the poem in Vietnam—a place of otherness—her discussion of the “multiplied, multiplied” image of “infant after infant” appeals to ideas of family and children, commonalities that exist across cultures. Likewise, Levertov embeds her poem within images of Christianity and of the Christian season of Advent in order to stir a sense of kinship within her American audience. Through images both powerful and easily relatable to a Western audience, Levertov is able to ground her anti-war argument within a concrete discussion of violence.

“Advent 1966” speaks not only of the poet’s loss of poetic vision, but it also rejects romanticized visions of poetic sight and the mysticism that oftentimes accompanied it. While Levertov argues that she has received the insight and inspiration of poetic sight, she shows that the images of the war have affected the ways in which she

views not only the world but also herself as a writer. The poet is not a lofty figure detached from the masses but is rather engaged and shockingly vulnerable. Connecting the idea of the female poet as engaged, DuPlessis argues in “For the Etruscans” that feminist poets strive to connect to their audiences rather than to assert themselves as mythic figures who are “not better than the reader, not set apart from; not seeking the authority of the writer. Not even seeking the authority of the writing” (5). Therefore, Levertov’s task is to connect with her audience and to present an argument for peace that a reader can navigate and understand, something that is exemplified through Levertov’s employment of simple images and relatable human experiences. Creating lofty, complicated poetry that alienates the simple reader is not what Levertov strives to achieve; her goal, instead, is to spread her anti-war message to as many readers as possible. Still, Levertov acknowledges that she possesses poetic sight and has been entrusted with a gift; not only does she have the ability to craft nuanced poetry, but she also has keen insight into humanity’s suffering. Levertov understands the power of her vision, but she is intent on using it in an inclusive rather than exclusive manner, and her primary concern is to write against the war.

While Levertov’s Vietnam poems are strong examples of visionary poetics, she believes her voice as a poet to be a divine gift. However, Levertov’s Vietnam poems are starkly realistic, focusing on realism rather than myth. As Alice Templeton states in “What’s the Use: Writing Poetry in Wartime” Levertov rejects mythic resonance in her Vietnam poems. Templeton questions if “pure myth achieves nearly complete detachment from immediate political meaning” thus causing “the distancing effect of myth [...] to manage the trauma of a real war situation without reaching the self-

defeating limits of abstraction and determinism” (54). Templeton brings “Advent 1966” into the discussion, stating that this poem uses mythic resonance in order to “provide irony, not transcendence” (54).

Specifically, the image of the suffering children—which is connected back to ideas of the sufferings of Christ in the poem’s discussion of the Advent season—is used “to the point that the poet can find nothing extraordinary or redemptive in the repetitive sight” (54). The repetition of images used by Levertov mirrors “war’s repetitive excess [that] threatens the very life of the poetic imagination” (54). However, Templeton concludes that it is Levertov’s rejection of traditional poetic notions that sets her apart and makes her war poems successful renderings of images and messages: “[I]t is the failure of mythic meaning that yields clarity” (54). By drawing a connection between Levertov’s poetry and the idea that poetic sight needs to be projected both on and off the page, Templeton highlights the fact that the threats to Levertov’s poetic imagination came from the “failure of mythic meaning” to “yield clarity.” By turning away from myth, Levertov has found poetic clarity within reality—specifically in terms of the stark images she observes of the war. Templeton’s statement shows the value that Levertov put upon the poetic sight she believed she had received, as well as the responsibility to speak to the conditions of the world that she perceived as being attached to this divine gift.

In “Advent 1966” Levertov does not argue for what would traditionally be assumed—that her poetic sight provides her with the vision necessary to write about the war; rather, she is showing that the images of the war have impaired her poetic sight. Reflecting on the images of dying children, Levertov remarks that “because of this my strong sight, / my clear caressive sight, my poet’s sight I was given / that it might stir me

to song, / is blurred” (12-15). Levertov expands upon the idea of her poetic sight being lessened:

There is a cataract filming over  
my inner eyes. Or else a monstrous insect  
has entered my head, and looks out  
from my socket with multiple vision (16-19)

Levertov brings the idea of her poetic vision back to the images of the dying, showing that how the suffering is similar to that of the “monstrous insect.” The “multiple vision” pertains to “seeing not the Holy Infant / burning sublimely, an imagination of redemption, / furnace in which souls are wrought into new life, / but, as a off a beltline, more senseless figures aflame” (20-23). By juxtaposing images of religion—romanticized visions of the “Holy Infant” that have become engrained in sentimental poetics—with the images of Vietnam which, she is arguing, cannot and should not be romanticized, she demonstrates the limits of war poetry and argues that war should not be allowed to be glorified.

Likewise, Levertov makes a statement against glamorizing her own role as a war poet. Instead, she acknowledges the limits that have been placed on her artistic talents by the war’s depravity. Ultimately, she brings her discussion of vision to a close with the following lines: “And this insect (who is not there— / it is my own eyes do my seeing, the insect / is not there, what I see is there) / will not permit me to look elsewhere” (24-27). She concludes by restating the images that are so troubling her, bringing the reader back to the fact that this is ultimately a political poem rather than a personal poem relating only to her experiences as a writer. “If I look, to see except dulled and unfocused

/ the delicate, firm, whole flesh of the still unburned,” Levertov writes (28-29). While acknowledging that she has been a recipient of poetic visions—and therefore has authority as a poet to document the world around her—Levertov is also cognizant of the limitations placed on both the poet and the poem in times of extreme chaos, and she illustrates this through a discussion of her blurred poetic sight.

Beyond an awareness of the divine inspiration or gift of poetry, Levertov’s poetry also shows a knowledge of the repercussions of her subject matter. While Levertov’s authority was questioned because of her gender, she was also rejected on occasion because her political activism was not always in line with mainstream thought. Levertov highlights her role as an activist poet—and the reaction that came from that—in her poem “The Day the Audience Walked Out on Me, and Why.” While Levertov acknowledges that after reading two poems (“What Were They Like” and “Life at War”) at a memorial for the victims of the Kent State shootings, she then—by her own admission—lapsed into an admonishment of those gathered.

Levertov recounts telling the audience that “our gathering is a mockery unless / we remember also / the black students shot at Orangeburg two years ago” (11-13). She goes on to remark “let us be sure / we know it is hypocrisy / to think of them unless / we make our actions their memorial, / actions of militant resistance” (23-26). Here, Levertov shows that a poet’s sense of responsibility lies not only in protesting the injustices of war, but rather all injustices, and here she highlights her response to issues localized within America. However, Levertov writes of the individuals who left as a response to her pleadings to “make our actions their memorial” (25). If the audience stayed for readings of poems that are clearly calling for specific needs for justice but became angered when

the poet moved away from the page to decry other injustices, then Levertov is making a statement about the ways in which a poet is supposed to interact with the world, specifically the need for the poet to take action. While “Life at War” and “What Were They Like” are radical in the fact that they are overtly anti-war, “The Day the Audience Walked Out on Me, and Why” shows the rejection of the poet as a speaker off of the page.

In “The Day the Audience Walked Out on Me and Why,” Levertov likely portrays the reality of what actually happened at the reading, but she takes liberty in her portrayal of the poet—in this case herself—as a holy being entrusted with the same divine poetic sight she speaks of in “Advent 1966.” Because this memorial service occurred in a chapel, the similarities between the poet and the divine are easily accessible. Levertov writes that her poems came after the “reading from the psalms,” thus establishing a logical connection between what is traditionally associated with the divine within Western culture (Christianity) and the calling of poetry, which she sees as divine (2). Levertov writes that “while I spoke the people /—girls, older women, a few men—/ began to rise and turn / their backs to the altar and leave” (16-19). The girls, women, and men are not only, according to Levertov, turning their backs on her, they are also turning their backs on the altar, which represent holiness and truth. In the second to last stanza, Levertov writes of the man who stood up and “said my words / desecrated a holy place” (32-33). The idea of the poet “desecrat[ing] a holy place” goes against Levertov’s beliefs in poetic sight as outlined in this poem and in “Advent 1966.” If the poet has been given vision and insight that sets her apart from the masses, then this vision—a gift from the

divine—allows the poet credibility, and, in fact, mandates that the poet speak against injustice.

Like her poems, Levertov's essays clearly take a stance on issues relating to war, gender, and the power of social and creative action, and they provide insight into Levertov's perception of the importance of gender within a discussion of poetry. However, Levertov's essays take a different stance on gender than her poetry does. While she speaks to the importance of the female poet—an idea evident throughout her poetry—her prose works to negate the notion of a gendered voice. In the boldly titled “Gender and Genre v. Serving an Art” Levertov makes purposeful statements that show her confidence in the power of women's writings about war as well as the necessity that women write about atrocities with the same convictions as male writers. At the same time, Levertov also downplays the attention that was given to her gender: “I don't believe I have ever made an aesthetic decision based on my gender” (103). Speaking of the assumptions that permeate poetry, gender, and gendered poetry, Levertov observes, “the content of the poem often reveals, or is naturally assumed to reveal, the sex of its author” (103). Here, Levertov shows the idea that it is “naturally assumed” that a poem must be gendered to be short sighted. While Levertov's poetry claims a specifically gendered sense of vision, Levertov uses this essay to argue that one needs to transcend the limits of gender in order to focus on what is truly important and what the poet must speak out against—the sufferings and violence that permeate the modern world. While her poetry makes a similar argument concerning the topics that poetry should decry, her Vietnam era poems make a strong argument concerning the idea that the female poet should embrace rather than ignore the empathy associated with motherhood and femininity.

In this essay, however, Levertov states that examining a poet's gendered voices is not important when a concern with gender and femininity overshadow the horrors the poet is decrying: "A true artist of either sex must necessarily be, in *relation to the art he or she serves* [...] a person of courage and energy who will not succumb to that kind of cultural pressure" (103). By stating that the poet, whether male or female, has an authority and divine calling to write (and therefore turning from the specifically gendered stance of her poetry), Levertov argues against the critics who assumed her a lesser poet. Despite the statements of these essays, though, Levertov's poems do show an embracing of a clearly gendered self-representation, and this prose piece shows a conscious attempt to steer her poetic legacy away from associations with gender and instead towards a recognition of their anti-war messages. As a female poet writing political poems during the era of second wave feminism, Levertov worked against societal conventions through her poetry, and her role as a woman writing about war oftentimes garnered more attention than her actual messages of peace.

However, in eschewing the importance of the poet's gendered voice, Levertov also makes an argument for the guilt of all Americans—both male and female—in allowing the war to continue. In "The Poet in the World" Levertov uses gendered portrayals of the poet juxtaposed with images of desensitized Americans watching the war unfold on their TV screens to show that the poet embodies mother, father, and child—and is therefore both genderless and ageless—in his or her efforts to convey the true realities of the war to mentally and physically detached American families. In this essay, Levertov attributes both masculine and feminine pronouns to the poet. Levertov begins the essay by returning to images of motherhood found within her poetry and

describing the poet in labor who “has been told that it will not hurt but it has hurt so much that the pain and struggle seem, just now, the only reality” (129). She then transitions to the idea that “the poet is a father” (129). However, he is present within the same delivery room scene, where “the poet is being born” (129). The newborn poet “is aware of the world around him” and he “call[s] out to the world with what he finds in his voice, in a cry of anger, pathos” (129). In the images of the mother, father, and child—the very images that define the makings of an American family—Levertov shows that the poet is not made up of one part, and in these descriptions, we see the poet as an active being who is creating, observing, and speaking. Just as the poet—the individual championing peace—is mother, father, and child, all Americans, regardless of gender or age, are called to work for social justice.

Transitioning into concrete ideas of a mid-twentieth century American family, Levertov shows why society—and specifically 1960’s and 1970’s American society—needs war poetry and identifies how her poetry is able to respond to this need. The poet—whether male, female, or child—is aware that the trappings of materialism and the comforts of the American middle class have created a sense of otherness between affluent Americans and those being oppressed in Vietnam. The poet “has seen the lifted fork pause in the air laden with its morsel of TV dinner as the eye of the woman holding it paused for a moment at the image on the screen that showed a bamboo hut go up in flame and a child run screaming towards the camera” (132). Despite the ways in which television allows it to appear as if the Vietnamese child is actually running towards the American viewer, she shows that in many cases televised images of the war became so commonplace that Americans could not grasp that this was a reality. She continues to

make her point by describing the way in which the woman calmly finishes her dinner, choosing to not react in outrage to the death and destruction unfolding before her eyes. Levertov sees her role as poet as providing a call to action, and this sense of purpose is demonstrated through both her poems and essays. In many ways, this woman represents the target audience of Levertov's poems—the privileged, safe American who is physically and emotionally detached from the Vietnam War. It is this person whom Levertov attempts to reach, and she is called to lessen the gap between these divergently different human existences.

Although the language employed in Levertov's essays shows a slightly different stance on the subject of war and gender than her poetry (which is firmly in support of the female poet) her essays reveal additional insight into her pro-peace message. In reading and understanding Levertov's essays on poetry and war, the reader is able to better understand the forces driving her poetry. Levertov believed in the power of the female poet and the need to use a clearly gendered speaker's voice, as seen through her insistence that motherhood has given her a unique perspective in understanding the war. Her essays, with their insistence that all individuals are called to speak against the war, demonstrate the passion with which she believed in the anti-war movement. While her poetry is very pro-female, her essays place less of an importance on the role of gender. This shows that although Levertov believes she had a right to speak on importance of the female poet, she does not believe the right to decry the war to be solely that of women. Levertov's essays demonstrate the idea that speaking a message of peace is a communal process in which everyone should be involved. While her poetry shows a strong emphasis

on poetic vision, her essays argue that every individual should be called to make a political statement.

While Levertov's Vietnam poems offer clear and concise portraits of sufferings and provide calls to empathetic action, these poems also make a compelling argument for the imperative role of the war poet, whether male or female. As a women poet writing about the Vietnam War in a time that intersected with the rise of second wave feminism, Levertov faced profound criticism because of her gender and her chosen subject matter. Questioned as an authority figure in speaking against the war because she was a woman, Levertov had to carefully choose how she presented herself within her poetry, and while her poetry deals extensively with the subject of war, it also speaks to the poet's representation of herself. On the page, Levertov's strong voice allows her to have a compelling presence. She works to demonstrate how her credibility is not decreased because she is a woman, instead making the argument that being a woman and a mother has not only given her increased empathy when examining the suffering in Vietnam but also how it has enhanced her poetic sight. Believing that the poet is endowed with a divine gift, Levertov extensively discusses her poetic sight in order to demonstrate her credibility in writing about the war. Although she did not experience Vietnam or combat firsthand, Levertov's Vietnam poems are among the twentieth century's most compelling portraits of violence, and they speak extensively not just to the topic of war but also to questions of who has the authority to write about the subject.

Remembering Revolution: The Poet as Witness in Carolyn Forché's *The Country Between Us*

El Salvador saw horrific massacres, deep political unrest, and severe human rights violations as the result of civil war during the 1970s and 1980s. Few Americans captured this time of upheaval as poignantly or as vividly as Carolyn Forché, whose second volume of poetry, *The Country Between Us*, speaks to this tragic time period. Not only does Forché's volume act as a testament to the sufferings that she witnessed firsthand, but it also serves to create a dialogue between North and Latin Americans. Forché writes about the things that she sees while in El Salvador, but she also reflects on her feelings regarding her return to America. These poems question how an individual can function within the affluent, consumer society of the United States after living abroad in a country deeply fractured by social, economic, and militaristic divides. Likewise, the poems examine how one's memories of war can be communicated to individuals whose daily lives are largely untouched by the particulars of another country's sufferings.

Forché's poetry traces the theme of the self and the "other," wondering aloud how a person can move between these two spheres. While Forché has been deeply moved by her experiences in El Salvador, she is still cognizant of her identity as an American. As an American, she has a duty to convey the messages of war back to her American contemporaries—the very people who, in many ways, have the power to affect a change. Upon returning to her homeland, though, Forché experiences a sense of culture shock. The Americans whom she encounters after her time in El Salvador do not seem ready to accept her stories of recollections concerning the horrors she witnessed, despite their country's difficult political connections to Latin American revolutions. While the Americans Forché writes about have a peculiar yearning to hear the details of tortures and

executions, they are hesitant to absorb the messages of suffering that Forche wishes to convey. This difficulty in terms of what Forche needs to communicate and the stark difference in the details that the American audience craves affects her voice as a poet. Having been called to speak of this civil war, Forche contributes to a tradition of poetic calls to action, but she is also called to communicate directly with an audience. In *The Country Between Us*, Forche writes about the struggle to locate her poetic voice, and this volume serves not only to bear witness to what the poet has seen in El Salvador but also to chronicle the poet's journey towards public remembrance of the atrocities she has witnessed.

It was poetry—especially the poetry of the exiled and marginalized—that brought Forche to El Salvador. As Forche herself recollects in “Reading the Living Archives,” she journeyed to Spain in 1977 to translate the poetry of Claribel Alegria, to whom many of the poems of *The Country Between Us* are dedicated. Therefore, not only does Forche turn to poetry as an act of bearing witness, but she also had a strong foundational knowledge of a tradition of poetry speaking to political upheavals and human rights violations before beginning her journey to Latin America. Forche describes her position in El Salvador as having been that of a “documenter of human rights abuses,” an idea that gives her poetry a sharp focus and a deliberate sense of purpose (21). It was one of Alegria's relatives with whom Forche initially stayed in El Salvador, and, while there, Forche worked closely with both Archbishop Oscar Romero—one of the key figures in the country's social justice movement—and Amnesty International (“Reading”). She stayed in the country for roughly three years, returning to the United States in the weeks before Romero was killed (“Reading”).

The time during which Forche was in El Salvador was one of the most violent and dangerous periods in the country's history. As Tommie Sue Montgomery's *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace* explains, the roots of conflict in this country were based in severe economic inequalities, which included most families earning less than a living wage and most of the middle and lower class being unable to own land. Likewise, El Salvador bore the scars of centuries of Spanish colonialism, while also serving as a pawn in America's troubled relationship with Nicaragua. In the article "Fear and Torment in El Salvador" Noel Valis writes of the dual roots of El Salvador's problems: the United States' viewing of the country as at risk of falling to Communism as well as El Salvador's history of military rule and the power of the landed oligarchy (117). These influences "had created by the 1970s an explosive social and economic situation, ideologically translated into an extreme Right and an extreme Left" (117). As Valis notes, "an archaic social structure had worsened with a declining economy and the influx of peasants into city slums" (117). Eventually this led to the rise of a radically Right-wing government, "which seemed incapable of distinguishing between legitimate peaceful dissent and armed opposition," ultimately resulting in the armed forces, death squads, and security forces carrying out tortures and killings (117).

The extreme violence that drew people's attention during the 1970s and 1980s—including the stories that the media transmitted to American audiences—was truly horrific. Montgomery writes "violence was not introduced in El Salvador by the revolutionaries," but rather the result of centuries of questionable governmental practices (21). Montgomery goes on to say, "violence has been the most pervasive characteristic in Salvadoran history—from the easily identifiable repression of government forces and

vigilantes in the pay of large landowners to the more subtle violence of malnutrition, high infant mortality, illiteracy, and housing more fit for chickens than human beings” (21). Forche had to contend with these issues and complexities both in her actual work within the country as well as her poetic representations of El Salvador. The country and its conflicts were more than just the violence of the war, and Forche works to understand the nation and its people as being more than just a story of bloodshed.

Reflecting thirty years later on her time in El Salvador, Forche’s “Reading the Living Archives,” illustrates the influence that her time in the country had on her as both a person and a poet. Forche, who returned to America in March of 1980, recollects, “the woman who traveled to El Salvador—the young poet I had been—did not come back” (21). This statement echoes a similar remembrance from the introductory material to *Against Forgetting*, in which Forche states that her physical journey was her trip to El Salvador, but her mental journal was her reintegration into American society. Forche remembers that my “journey began in 1980, upon my return from El Salvador [...] Something happened along the way to the introspective poet I had been” (“Reading” 30). In these statements, Forche clearly locates El Salvador as a turning point within her poetry. Likewise, she labels herself as a poet; this self-recognition is an essential part of her identity and shows how she conceptualizes herself in terms of her El Salvador experiences. She remembers the “young poet” who first embarked into human rights work as well as the changes that happened to the “introspective poet” of her pre-El Salvador days. In these statements, Forche sees herself not simply as an American or a Westerner; her identity as a poet allows her to stand apart outside of national boundaries. If her conceptualization of herself is tied to her poetry, then it is through poetry that she

will express and question her experiences. Her experiences and her craft will be molded together, as they are in *The Country Between Us*.

Not only did El Salvador change the ways in which Forche saw herself as a poet, but the country also altered her thoughts on poetry and the very active ways in which poetry can function within society. Forche explains the trajectory of her changing worldview and how this shift led to the beginnings of her grasp on the concept of “poetry of witness”: “The woman who *did* return wrote, in those years, seven poems marked by the El Salvador experience, and also an essay [...] in which this returning poet states: ‘It is my feeling that the twentieth-century human condition demands a poetry of witness’” (“Reading” 30). Again, Forche purposefully identifies herself as a poet, and she speaks of herself as “this returning poet” in the third person. The poet, we see, views El Salvador within a historical context; she thinks about the social and political events that have happened not only during her lifetime but also across the twentieth century. It is the century’s combined tragedies that mandate the bearing of witness, and Forche turns to poetry as a means of expressing this witness. The action of speaking to others remains of paramount importance to her, as the twentieth century’s constant descents into violence and turmoil have called her to speak remembrances aloud and to spread the message of what has occurred. The poet should be confessional not only in speaking of her own interior life; rather, the poet is called to confess the horrors unfolding around her.

In “What’s the Use? Writing Poetry in Wartime” Alice Templeton writes about the legacy of poetry of witness, examining how this genre of poetics proposed by Forche has had a lasting impact beyond Forche’s own work. Templeton speaks to the need for poetry of witness to be a steppingstone to action: “It seems a ‘poetry of witness,’ deriving

its authority from the poet's immediate involvement should be truthful enough to vitalize the reader" (44). However, Templeton notes that a difference exists between poetry that simply recounts events and poetry that truly bears witness to suffering while lending a voice to the oppressed. "The poems of 'authentic' witness, many of which are journalistic in tone and stylistically interchangeable, most often sustain the war-dominated imagination they claim to write against," she notes, showing that it is not enough for a poet to simply have an "authentic" perspective (44). Poetry of witness and poetry of war are not the same things, and while poetry of witness oftentimes does include a discussion of war, it is not in praise of the military or the nuances of battle. Rather, poetry of witness—as Forche shows in *Against Forgetting*—aims to lend a voice to the voiceless or to those who otherwise might not be heard.

However, poetry of witness necessitates that the poet have closeness to the events or conditions about which he or she is writing. Forche demonstrates this in her selection of content for *Against Forgetting*, as she organizes the volume around crucial events of the twentieth century and choosing, within each section, writers with firsthand relations to the conflict. Therefore, each poet has credibility. His or her work is not speculative; instead, their witnesses are lived and personal. Returning to ideas of the poet's authentic voice, Templeton states that poetry of witness should work as she questions the "first person authenticity" that is required for war poetry to be both "authentic and truthful" (44). Alicia Ostriker corroborates the points that Templeton raises concerning the importance of the poet, writing, "it is crucial that the poet is *present* and *located* in the poem. The poet is not simply a phantom manipulator of words but a confused actual person, caught in a world of catastrophe that the poem must somehow both mirror and

transcend” (35). That the poet is “a confused actual person” speaks to the poet’s proximity to these events. It is not the precision of the poet’s writing or flow of her verse that gives the poet authority within the context of witnessing. Rather, the poet of witness brings the reader along as she herself attempts to reconcile the unfortunate events that have personally touched her life alongside ideas of social justice and human rights.

While Templeton categorizes poetry of witness as war poetry that is “authentic and truthful,” Forche is clear in “Reading the Archives” to categorize poetry of witness apart from political poetry, in part because her post-El Salvador work was sharply criticized for having what was perceived to be a political nature. Not only did Forche’s work change following her return to America, but so did the reaction to her poetry. Forche writes in *Against Forgetting* about the unfavorable reactions she received from her contemporaries, who began to criticize her work and argue against “the ‘subject matter,’ or against the right of a North American to contemplate such issues in her work” (“Reading” 30). Likewise, there was disapproval over Forche’s “mixing of what they saw as the mutually exclusive realms of the personal and political” (“Reading” 30). Katha Pollitt, herself a noted poet, remarked in a review, “Forche’s topics could not be more urgent, more extreme or more public... And yet, she uses a language designed for quite other purposes, the misty ‘poetic’ language of the isolated, private self” (qtd. in Rea 94). While Forche speaks to the political upheavals that she witnesses, she also writes of the changes that she personally undergoes, and, as the poet, she remains a central character within her work.

Because Forche is a citizen of the United States, the conditions of revolution are not affecting her in the same way they are impacting those who live in El Salvador, and

Forche does not claim to be suffering to the same extent. Nevertheless, she identifies herself as undergoing profound changes because of what she has seen, and she discusses these personal evolutions within her text. In the poems of *The Country Between Us*, she does not combine the personal and the political in order to create an image of the poet as all-knowing or all-powerful. While people like Pollitt might sneer at the “misty ‘poetic language of the [...] self,” Forche shows that poetry of witness becomes more dynamic when the person who is doing the witnessing remains present within the poem. Denise Levertov, herself a poet who faced criticism for her use of the personal within war poems, commended Forche for interspersing these two spheres, remarking that Forche “is creating poems in which there is no seam between personal and political, lyrical and involved” (qtd. in Rea 94). Likewise, Paul Rea, in his article “The Poet as Witness: Carolyn Forche’s Powerful Pleas From El Salvador,” acknowledges that “in a time when both poetic experimentation and political involvement seem out of fashion, [Forche] has successfully challenged the reigning polarities—the ‘public’ versus the ‘personal,’ the ‘political’ versus the ‘poetic’” (94). Here, Rea speaks to the attitudes that were prevalent within the literary establishment during the time in which Forche was writing. Rea illustrates the challenges that Forche was working against, and he speaks to the idea that, in combining the political and the personal, she was writing against the poetic conventions prevalent within 1980s America.

The interspersion of the personal and the political is essential to what Forche works to accomplish, because only through her insertion of her own personal experiences into her work can she make the points that she strives to articulate, especially in terms of reaching a specific audience through words. Much of Forche’s poetry chronicles her

attempts to communicate with her fellow Americans. In these instances, Forche's poetry is as much about America as it is about El Salvador, and the poet articulates the mentality of many of 1980s era Americans, individuals who are detached from the idea that suffering can occur in one's own country. *The Country Between Us* shows Forche trying to communicate the deep-set issues of political turmoil with individuals who crave these stories because of the dark and morbid details that they include, rather than because of a genuine interest in global issues. As a result of a thirst for sensationalism and lack of concern for issues of social justice, *The Country Between Us* chronicles a growing divide between Forche and her intended audience. Rea writes, "the violence Forche has seen in El Salvador, plus the American role in that violence, has rendered her unable to talk to people from her own country" (95). The division that Forche feels between herself and her fellow Americans occurs not only when she is in El Salvador; instead, it continues long after she returns to her home country. Rea observes that "even upon her return home, she felt herself an exile," an issue that is apparent throughout the volume (95). Therefore, the personal exists in order to articulate political struggles of nationality and identity. If the poet is in "an exile" because of the nature of her work, then the poet's personal experiences have become interwoven into both the political message of the text as well as the poetics itself.

In a position of an observer, an exile, or an active participant, the poet becomes immersed in both the political and the personal aspects of war poetry. In developing a counterargument to those who decried her combination of the personal and political within verse, Forche formed her concept of poetry of witness. In *Against Forgetting*, Forche writes about the realization that "the arguments about poetry and politics had been

too narrowly defined” (30). Forche’s work—and especially a volume like *The Country Between Us*—acts to challenge this narrow definition of what political poetry is and how it functions. Forche expands upon the idea of poetry as bearing witness, remarking that “regardless of ‘subject matter,’ these poems bear the trace of extremity within them, and they are, as such, evidence of what occurred” (30). Therefore, it is not the subject matter that classifies the poetry as bearing witness, but the extremity that comes along with the act of witnessing. Forche is quoted as defending her poetic representations of witness, even if some may see them as too political:

I could not keep El Salvador from my poems because it had become so much a part of my life. I was cautioned to avoid mixing art and politics, that one damages the other, and it was some time before I realized that ‘political poetry’ often means the poetry of protest, accused of polemical didacticism, and not the poetry which implicitly celebrates politically acceptable values” (qtd. in Pinsky 425).

In this passage, Forche shows how the personal and political became one for her. She went to El Salvador to observe a political conflict, but in going, observing, and experiencing, the events became her own personal experiences. Because the violence of El Salvador became a part of her life, then the argument that in “mixing art and politics [...] one damages the other” becomes negated. However, Forche is also cognizant of the need to change the definition of political poetry. She shows that it does not have to be seen solely as “the poetry of protest, accused of polemical didacticism,” but rather political poetry can also include references to the individual, both in terms of the poet’s

personal experiences as well as the experiences of the individual person whose story makes up a thread of the larger narrative of revolution in El Salvador.

Just as Forche's poetry faced criticism for blending the personal and the political, so is the intersection of personal and political important within the concept of poetry of witness. However, poetry of witness, she argues, does present challenges in its complexity:

Poetry of witness presents the reader with an interesting interpretive problem. We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between 'personal' and 'political' poems—the former calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss, the latter indicating a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary. The distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much and too little scope; at the same time, it renders the personal too important and not important enough. If we give up on the dimension of the personal, we risk relinquishing one of the most powerful sites of resistance (Forche 31).

Forche shows that the accepted definition of personal poetry goes back to the traditional "lyrics of love and emotional loss" and can only be centered on the individual's experience with others, not within a greater political context. However, Forche demonstrates that this definition limits poetics by "giv[ing] the political realm too much and too little scope." Forche ends on the idea of the personal as being "one of the most powerful sites of resistance," meaning that it is through the inclusion of the personal that political poetry is able to achieve the greatest influence over the reader. Poetry of witness is not simply reportage; rather, it is the lived memory transformed within poetry.

While acknowledging the legitimacy of combining the personal and the political, Forche speaks of the limitations that poetry faces when it is focused upon only the personal. The “celebration of the personal,” she writes, “can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality” (“Reading” 31). While the individual is a powerful force within Forche’s poetry, she portrays the individual against a backdrop of community and nation. This negates the “myopia” of a lack of “larger structure” and rejecting ideas of the self as living an isolation constructed by outside forces (31). Likewise, the poet needs to turn away from what has been deemed culturally acceptable by society in order to create poetry of witness. Pinsky’s article quotes Forche as stating that “Society depends on the poet to witness something, and yet the poet can discover that thing only by looking away from what society has learned to see poetically” (426). The poet is not able to achieve true poetics by complying with the standards of the establishment; rather, the poet must be challenging these boundaries.

Although Forche acknowledges that both the personal and political have a place within poetry and that political poetry can still be personal and vice versa, she also sees the need for a third realm within poetics. Forche terms this additional space “the social” and writes that this is the space within which most North Americans dwell. Because North Americans have not seen war fought in their towns and communities since the nineteenth century, they have a removed position from warfare, even when they are fighting overseas. Still, though, Forche sees North Americans as bearing witness and observing the pains of war, and this idea is articulated through the process of remembering and protesting. “Perhaps we should not consider our social lives as merely

the products of our choice: the social is a place of resistance and struggle, where books are published, poems read, and protest disseminated,” Forche writes, adding that it “is the sphere in which claims against the political order are made in the name of justice” (“Reading” 31). The social, therefore, is the space in which poetry of witness can be created through the intellectual fostering of protest. At once, then, Forche’s work is both a location *for* the social as well as a vehicle *towards* the social. In creating poetry of witness, she resists and struggles in a quest for social justice while also creating the works that will eventually lead others toward a means of creating their own works of witness.

In understanding the social, Forche suggests, we must first understand the roles that poetry plays in our lives and our ideas, which color our understandings of poetics. Poetry, she writes, must be judged “by its consequences, not by our ability to verify its truth” (31). Forche expands upon the role of art in preserving memory, stating that “there will be nothing for us to base the poem on, no independent account that will tell us whether or not we can see a given text being ‘objectively’ true” (31). Because art is, in most cases, our basis for these accounts, there will be nothing factual against which to challenge the art. Instead, we must make judgments against forms of art (including poetry) by examining their abilities to impact and to affect change—the “consequences” of its presence. Forche shows that objective truth does not matter in terms of her poetry. Rather, a reader should examine the ways in which her poetry functions alongside society as a whole.

While Forche argues that it is not essential to be able to verify the truth of the poetry, she does assert a connection between poetry and “the real.” “The poetry of

witness frequently resorts to paradox and difficult equivocation, to the invocation of what is *not* there as if it *were*, in order to bring forth the real,” Forche writes (“Reading” 40). By invoking what is not present (in other words, departing from the factual), the poet is able to illuminate greater spheres of what actually occurs. She goes on to remark, “The poetry of witness reclaims the social from the political and in so doing defends the individual against illegitimate forms of coercion. It often seeks to register through indirection and intervention the ways in which the linguistic and moral universes have been disrupted by events” (45). What the poet examines is not always the actual universe, but, as Forche writes, how words and ethics have been impacted by an event or an action. The truth, therefore, is found when registering the impact that war and violence has had upon culture, and these effects are found through words.

Just as Forche shows that understanding of factual events is crucial to grasping poetry of witness, she also argues that it is important to be able to comprehend the ways in which the poet portrays events and ideas. Understanding the poet’s actions—and especially the magnitude of these actions—is crucial to realizing the poet’s role as witness. Because the poet sheds light upon injustices “[w]itness’ would come to refer, much of the time, to the person of the poet” (21). Forche recalls how many poets of witness “were considered by some to be engaged in writing documentary literature, or poetic reportage, and in the model of political confessionality” (21). According to Forche, the poet’s role is to bring the reader into the sphere of witness, allowing the poet to (through the text) experience the conditions that the poet identifies. However, the poet also speaks to the need to write of events as they happen and provide factual evidence rather than simply take creative license in order to bring the reader to a conclusion.

Forche argues her understanding of the term poetry of witness as “a mode of reading rather than of writing, of readerly encounter with the literature of that-which-happened, and its mode is evidentiary rather than representation—as evidentiary, in fact, as spilled blood” (21). The poet, therefore, has been assigned the task of communicating to the reader by writing of the facts of “spilled blood.” The artistic form of the poetry is less important than the ability of the work to convey a message. The power of the words is located in the “readerly encounter” with the text, which serves as a source of knowledge regarding the “spilled blood” of war.

While Forche points to her own work as being instrumental in the development and inclusion of the term into the poetic lexicon, she also looks beyond her own collections of poetry to show how others also led to the rise of poetry of witness. In tracing the origin of the term, Forche clarifies the vision she has for what poetry of witness should and can accomplish. Forche points to Czeslaw Milosz’s monograph *The Witness of Poetry* as an instrumental text within this genre of poetics. However, Forche also highlights the difficulties in conveying and understanding what this type of poetry strives to accomplish, recalling how in the early 1980s “a phrase, ‘poetry of witness,’ entered the lexicon of literary terms, [and was] regarded skeptically by some as a euphemism for ‘political poetry,’ or as political poetry by other means” (“Introduction” 21). Forche shows that she alone is not responsible for the creation of this category of poetics. Rather, by joining her work within a larger body of texts, she allows her poems—especially those within *The Country Between Us*—to function as a continuation of a history of bearing witness.

While Forche's *Against Forgetting*, published in 1993, represents a pre-September 11<sup>th</sup> way of thought, her text is often cited as being influential to more recent discussions of the ways in which poetry functions. In the introduction to her anthology *New American Poetry of Engagement*, Ann Kenniston points to Forche's ideas of witness as being fundamental to the work that followed it. Kenniston writes of witness as "an indispensable term of our poetic and critical vocabulary" (5). Kenniston examines the roots of poetry of witness, showing the shifts that it marks within the poetic tradition: "The notion that poetry could—and perhaps should—bear witness to extreme and even hitherto unspeakable events marks a larger cultural shift towards a view of poetry as responsible to and responsible for the world outside the self" (5). Kenniston also speaks to a "suspicion of politically engaged poetry" that has emerged "out of an epistemological sense that witness itself, and its association with truth and authenticity, is not possible in the twenty-first century" (5).

Although Forche's essays show that she was just beginning to conceptualize her ideas of poetry of witness while in El Salvador, *The Country Between Us* demonstrates that although Forche might have not fully developed the theory at the time, her El Salvador poems function in order to bear witness. Forche begins her volume with the poem "San Onofre, California," therefore locating the collection between North and Latin America. In this poem, Forche speaks to one of the southernmost points between the United States and South America. Forche begins the poem by remarking that "We have come far south," but still establishing that her poem's setting has not completely pushed beyond the boundaries of her home country (1). Balancing between these two regions, Forche then goes on to describe the distinctly Latin American scene waiting beyond the

border where one will find “the oldest women / shelling limas into black shawls” (2-3) and “children patting the mud” (6). Here, Forche shifts her focus from the landscape—as seen through her discussion of the southernmost point—to that of the individuals. The Latin America that she conceptualizes is not one of unstable governments or revolutions. Rather, she draws the reader’s attention to the individual person. While these images of Latin Americans (the black shawl, the children playing in the mud) do comply with stereotypical representations that North Americans would likely recognize, these references are not necessarily derogatory stereotypes, and by discussing the person as an individual rather than as a part of a political whole, the poet takes a humanistic approach.

Forche uses her discussion of the individual as a steppingstone to draw attention to the horrors that are occurring around these people, and she shows that these horrors always linger in the background. As Forche draws her reader into a journey through the surroundings, she mentions that “if we go on, we might stop / in the street in the very place where someone disappeared / and the words Come with us! We might / hear them” (7-11). While “Come with us!” sounds promising and inviting, there is a shock in being asked to come along to “the very place where someone disappeared” (8-9). These lines reflect Forche’s own journey towards El Salvador. Invited to go to the country by one of Claribel Alegría’s relatives, Forche found herself immersed in a society caught in the throes of a violent Civil War. There is, though, the idea that if we—both Forche and the reader—come along, then “We might / hear” the individuals who have disappeared. The suggestion that poetry might save people who have been lost or who are about to be lost frames Forche’s message. In inviting her reader to “Come with us!” on a poetic journey through a difficult and gruesome subject matter, she shows that the role of poetry extends

beyond the page. In reading her El Salvador poems, the reader does more than pass time or gain an appreciation for poetic voice. Instead, the reader is able to bear witness, create a remembrance, and affect social change, just as the poet does.

This knowledge, Forche shows, leads to a sense of complacency. Forche writes of this sense of calm: “That is why we feel / it is enough to listen / to the wind jostling lemons, to dogs ticking across the terraces” (13-16). In these lines, the idea that “it is enough to listen” speaks to the importance of taking time to listen to the stories of El Salvador. However, it is not simply “enough” to just hear these stories. Forche makes an argument—which is directed towards her fellow Americans—concerning the importance of doing more than listening. We stay in these moments of stillness and silence “knowing that while birds and warmer weather / are forever moving north, / the cries of those who vanish / might take years to get here” (17-20). The birds and warm weather traveling from Latin America to the United States speaks to the connection between the two regions, but the imagery turns away from the quiet and the serene with images of birds and warm weather in order to focus on the sinister aspects of “the cries of those who vanish.” Without quicker action these cries “might take years” to reach people who are in a position to affect change.

Just as “San Onofre, California” speaks to the relations between North and Latin Americas, Forche’s poem “Return” comments upon the shock at returning to a Western country after an extended span of time spent in El Salvador. Forche begins the poem by acknowledging that the time period is “upon my return to America,” therefore demonstrating the focus she will give to her readjustment (1). Immediately, Forche shows that she is shocked by the extravagance of middle class American life. Here is the land of

“iced drinks and paper umbrellas, clean / toilets and Los Angeles palm trees moving / like lean women” (2-4). The America that Forche evokes is not one of poverty or crime. This is the America of the resort lifestyle, of being able to enjoy drinks under palm trees in a calm and safe environment. To the poet having returned from a warzone, the affluence and the relaxation of this lifestyle seems shocking, and the following lines go on to explain Forche’s difficulty at finding a voice within her now alienating surroundings.

Although she has returned to her homeland, Forche shows that she carries with her the scars of what she witnessed in El Salvador, and the fear that is now embedded within her is apparent. Forche speaks to this sense of uncertainty when she remembers how “for months every tire blow-out / was final, every strange car near the house / kept watch” (6-8). The poet shows that her time in El Salvador has engrained in her not only a sense of fear but also of anxiety, as she continuously expects the violent conditions of El Salvador to be present within her North American community. In the fears that Forche carries with her as a result of her time in El Salvador, the importance of remembrance becomes pronounced. It is not just through remembrance that Forche can educate her contemporaries about the situation in El Salvador, but also how she herself can find a sense of peace. “I strained even to remember / things impossible to forget,” Forche writes (8-9). Not only has Forche’s uncertainty and sense of danger made it impossible to forget the conditions of El Salvador, but she also cannot forget because of the need that she feels to communicate her recollections of what she has witnessed.

To help herself process the experience, Forche turns to storytelling. The poem is identified as being for Josephine Crum, and Forche, speaking directly to Josephine, remembers how her friend “took my stories apart for hours, sitting / on your sofa with

your legs under you / and fifty years in your face” (9-12). As a poet returned from a warzone, Forche is in need of an audience to hear her memories. While she is looking for a larger scale audience to whom she can tell her stories, Josephine serves as a steppingstone, allowing Forche to communicate her remembrances within a quiet, intimate setting. Josephine, with “fifty years in [her] face,” serves as a knowledgeable and wise confidant for the young poet, and she provides Forche with an opportunity to carefully and methodically grapple with an understanding of El Salvador.

Much of the knowledge that Forche transmits is located within the details, and it is through the minutiae that the larger issues emerge. Speaking to Josephine, Forche remarks “So you know / now, you said, what kind of money / is involved in that *campesinos* knife” (13-15). While Forche speaks of the troubling economic exchanges that she has witnessed, the larger picture lies in the fact that weapons are being bought and sold, a sinister aspect when considering the stark brutality and violence of El Salvador’s civil war. An even more troubling tone is taken in the lines that remark on knowing “the mix / of machetes with whiskey” (18-19) that is connected with “the slip of the tongue / that costs hundreds of deaths” (19-20). Here, Forche shows that not all violence was calculated or even purposeful, and she speaks of how the carelessness that comes from the presence of whiskey and the access to weapons allows “hundreds of deaths” to occur.

In speaking with Josephine, Forche allows her friend to see all the things she herself experienced, thus illustrating the purpose of poetry in communicating these events. The horrors of remembering become clear when Forche writes that Josephine, through listening to the poet’s own recollections, has “seen the pit where men and women

/ are kept the few days it takes without / food and water” (21-23). Josephine has not witnessed these things firsthand, but the poet permits her to see them as if she herself traveled to El Salvador. These lines capture the loss of basic human rights, and Forche wants her poetry to illuminate the injustice of these conditions. While she does have a rapt audience in Josephine, details of basic human rights violations are not what her general audience is likely to pay attention to. Rather, Forche realizes that there is a penchant for dramatic, sensationalistic tales of terror of abuse.

Forche knows that she oftentimes does have an engaged audience with her American counterparts (as El Salvador did remain in American headlines for many years in the 1970s and 80s) but that stories of El Salvador do not always hold their attention for reasons of compassion or a quest for social justice. Americans, the poems suggests, are generally drawn to grisly images of death and dying, but these same individuals are oftentimes hostile to political messages. It is the ability to see violence but to be able to turn away, to close the book, or to turn off the television, that Forche identifies the average American as craving. Forche exposes this dark aspect of human nature when she says to Josephine, “You’ve heard the cocktail / conversation on which their release depends. / So you’ve come to understand why / men and women of good will read / torture reports with fascination” (23-27). In these lines, Forche speaks not of Americans but of the upper class Salvadorans whom she met while abroad, thus speaking to the deep corruption of the El Salvadoran power system. However, these individuals represent emotional responses that Forche also sees present across cultures. Like Forche’s fellow Americans, the upper class Salvadorans are aware of the cruelties and corruptions that exist, but they are removed enough that they can turn away without feeling complicit.

Forche does not necessarily fault these people, and there is a realization of understanding how these individuals, who are still “men and women of good will,” can act as they do. However, Forche uses these lines in order to categorize the difficulties that she encounters in writing poetry of witness.

Forche has the ability to be honest with Josephine about the realities of what she has seen, but she senses hesitancy in the response that her poetry will receive from the general public. “Go try on / Americans your long, dull story / of corruption, but better to give / them what they want,” Forche writes (35-38). Americans, she realizes, want sensationalism. “Tell them about the razor, the live wire, / dry ice and concrete, grey rats,” Forche instructs (42-43). Americans crave images of absolute horror, even if it does not spur them to take action. Forche continues her cataloguing of atrocities, at once both giving her audience what she identifies them as craving as well as cautioning against what she sees as a misguided thirst for entertainment: “Tell them about retaliation: Jose lying / on the flat bed truck, waving his stumps / in your face, his hands cut off by his / captors and thrown to the many acres of cotton, lost, still, and holding, the last few lumps of leeches earth” (45-48). Forche suggests that while the images she has retained in her memory from El Salvador are indeed gruesome, they are far more brutal than Americans realize. Instead of watching a horror movie, she has experienced these gruesome sights and actions firsthand, and they have stayed with her as only truly horrific violence can.

Following this recounting of horrors witnessed and the expression of anxiety over how to relay these visions, Forche transitions back to her own difficulties in growing accustomed once again to American life. Returning to the idea of the car, Forche reassures both herself, Josephine, and her reader: “As for the cars, of course / they watch

you and for this don't flatter / yourself. We are all watched. We are / all assembled" (58-61). Although Forche stresses the communal *we* here, she shows the isolation that she feels upon returning to America. She is out of place within her own homeland, and it is Forche who carries the burden of knowing what truly exists beyond the boundaries of American comfort. Forche carries the memories of her experiences with her always, writing that "I have not rested, not since I drove / those streets with a gun in my lap" (63-64). Although she has moved beyond the image of driving "those streets," she still carries with her the memories of living in this place of terror. At once, Forche is both part of a communal *we* as well as alone in her role of witness. Her task, then, is to share these memories of witness through her poetry.

While Forche sees her role as a poet as being rooted in the need to communicate her memories, she struggles in finding a way to express these words. Much of Forche's discomfort with American life connects to language. She remarks that "all manner of speaking has / failed and the remnant of my life / continues onward" (65-67). Speaking with Americans has left her with a feeling of emptiness: "When I speak with American men, / there is some absence of recognition" (71-72). Although Forche has found an ability to confide in Josephine, she tells her friend that she struggles to speak to other Americans: "I cannot, Josephine, talk to them" (96). This inability to speak connects to a lack of poetic voice, a disastrous turn of events for someone like Forche who clearly identifies the poets' need to speak. However, Forche shows this to be specifically linked to her role as a female poet, as it is American men who leave her with "some absence of recognition." Forche sees these men as being connected to affluence and hyper-masculinity, and she writes of "their constant Scotch and fine white / hands, many hours

of business, penises / hardened by motor inns,” portraying them as concerned with sex and with business rather than with questions of social justice (73-75). Likewise, they remind Forche of the powerful men whom she met in El Salvador—including the American attaché—who were unimpressed with poets and aid workers. Forche feels a communication barrier between herself and these power-hungry American men, and this causes her to hesitate in her speaking.

Just as El Salvador has made Forche weary of the behaviors and attitudes related to masculinity, El Salvador has also caused her to be able to better pinpoint the limitations of American life. “Your problem” Forche writes “is not your life as it is / in America, not that your hands, as you / tell me, are tied to do something” (116-18). She continues, identifying the problem as the fact “that you were born to an island of greed / and grace where you have this sense / of yourself apart from others” (119-121). It becomes clear that Forche is talking not to Josephine but of herself, expressing her own frustration at her lack of ability to affect change: “It is not your right to feel powerless. Better / people than you were powerless. / You have not returned to your country, / but to a life you never left” (121-125). Forche does admit a feeling of being “powerless” but also recognizes her role in a poetic tradition where people who had experienced more than she had were still able to turn to their poetry as a means of expression. However, in fearing that her time away from America has not helped her to develop a more confident and assertive voice, Forche remarks that she hasn’t just returned to her homeland but also the life that she once lived, a life in which she was not an authority in speaking of El Salvador.

While Forche realizes that she is part of a poetic tradition of being called to speak, she continues a discussion of the role of the writer in “Endurance,” in which she talks extensively about her position as a poet. In this poem, Forche makes reference to the Russian modernist poet Anna Akhmatova, who wrote extensively of Stalinist atrocities. Here, Forche characterizes herself as a young, naive poet who is trying to navigate a world that is in a state of turmoil. Forche sets up her interaction with Akhmatova by framing their conversation: “On each corner Anna dropped / her work in her lap and looked up. / I am a childless poet, I said” (26-28). It is Forche, the “childless poet,” who seeks guidance from the poetic tradition that Akhmatova represents. Forche portrays herself as lacking in a fulfillment of her responsibilities. “I have not painted an egg, made prayers / or finished my Easter duty in years,” she writes, making reference to the Russian Orthodoxy traditions of Akhmatova’s home country. While these might not actually be the duties of Forche’s life as an American woman living in the 1980s, Forche still possesses a sense of knowledge of the fact that she does have certain responsibilities. While her duties may not be to paint eggs or perform Easter rituals, she recognizes a sense of failing in regards to the duties connected to her poetic vision.

In this poem, Forche also highlights her role as an American and situates herself within the context of geography. She reflects, “I left Belgrade for Frankfurt last / summer, Frankfurt for New York, / New York for the Roanoke valley.” This mapping mirrors the journey that Forche took from Spain to El Salvador and then back to America. Rather than focusing on El Salvador, Forche speaks of the American landscape in a way that shows that El Salvador is not the only landscape with painful associations. The geography of America, Forche writes, holds within it memories of suffering. The

Roanoke valley is a place “where mountains hold the breath / of the dead between them and lift / from each morning a fresh bandage of mist.” Forche shows that America is not unlike El Salvador. While El Salvador carries with it a connotation of death and violence not just because of Forche’s remembrances but also as the result of media representations, this poem links America with images of the dead, thus showing that America’s landscape is not unlike that of El Salvador.

Forche, however, is brought back to the moment with Akhmatova, who reminds her of the attention that she must pay to the legacy of poetry of witness that has come before her. The older poet reminds the younger that she needs to listen to the past: “*Piskata, hold your tongue, she says. / I am trying to tell you something.*” The idea that Forche should not speak is striking in relation to her role as the poet—an individual whose very nature calls her to publicly express her thoughts. What this poem suggests, though, is that Forche should stop and listen to the poetic tradition that has come before her, as evidenced by Anna’s remark that “*I am trying to tell you something.*” Here, Forche sets the stage for understanding and appreciating the poetic tradition of which Akhmatova is a part and of which she herself is joining.

The idea of the poet’s role is further discussed in “Message,” a poem in which Forche remarks on the responsibilities of the poet to remember and protest against injustice. “I will live and living cry out until my voice is gone / to its hollow of earth, where with our / hands and by the lives we have chosen / we will dig deep into our deaths,” Forche writes, speaking to both the poet’s need to exhaust her voice as well as the need to join into a collective group, as seen through the “we” digging “deep into our deaths.” Forche follows these lines with a communal call for action, which she directs

towards the reader while also making reference to the poets who have come before her: “I have done all that I could do. / Link hands, link arms with me / in the next of lives everafter, / where we will not know each other / or ourselves, where will be a various darkness among ideas that amounted / to nothing, among men who amounted / to nothing.” Asking others to “link hands” with her speaks to the communal nature of remembering and bearing witness. Poetry, Forche writes in these lines, has the power to connect people across generations. Likewise, the idea that individuals will “not know each other / or ourselves” shows that poetry allows people to navigate issues of politics as well as issues of personal identity, thus demonstrating the mixing of the personal and political within verse.

Forche ends “Message” by speaking to “a belief that became / but a small light / in the breadth of time where we began / among each other, where we lived / in the hour farthest from God.” These lines show Forche as situating both herself and her poetry within a broader context. Her experiences in El Salvador represent an “hour farthest from God,” and her poetry works to make sense of events that seem to be deprived of God’s presence because of their extreme violence and terror. Forche works to find a place for her poetry within a greater tradition, and in her articulation of the concept of poetry of witness as well as her ideas on how a poet should bear witness, she shows that the Civil War in El Salvador was not an isolated incidence and that her poetry of remembering needs to speak to other texts in order to make sense of the interconnectedness of violence.

While many of Forche’s poems comment upon the idea of poetry of witness, she practices this witness in her prose poem “The Colonel,” which allows her to remember the cruelty inflicted upon the people of El Salvador by the government leaders. As

Templeton notes, this poem is a strong example of witness because the poet, who has been warned by her companion to “say nothing” in the moment, acts as the witness in her writing of her memories after the event (48). Templeton speaks to an analysis of what witness does to the poet, who in losing her voice through the urging to stay quiet in the moment, ultimately finds—through her poetry—the will to speak. Forche sets the stage within this poem by remembering the simple details of her visit with the Colonel, showing both the power of the poet’s memory as well as the importance of remembering things both big and small. Forche describes the scene to the reader in a steady tone, stating, “What you have heard is true. I was in his house” (16). Forche writes of how “his daughter filed her nails” and “his wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar” (16). The poet describes the everyday objects like newspapers and household pets fill the surroundings. By beginning with the simple, almost boring descriptions of home life, Forche shows that remembering—and consequently, understanding—is more than just the facts that would catch a newspaper reader’s attention. Instead, she shows that the conflicts in El Salvador are more than just the details of violence and that the people’s lives are more nuanced than the headlines reveal.

In giving time to the ordinary details of the night, Forche is able to better transition into her discussion of the Colonel’s violence. Within the setting of a pleasant dinner, Forche shows how everyday life gives way to shocking violence. Forche remembers how “we had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine” (16). They are served by a maid who brings, “green mangoes, salt, a type of bread” (16). The mood of the dinner shifts, however, when talk turns to “how difficult it had become to govern” (16). This conversation topic causes the Colonel to yell at his parrot, and in this moment of the

poem the Colonel begins to take action. At this point, Forche's descriptions of the scene begin to take a lesser role, and the focus shifts to the shocking display of violence that the Colonel will reveal.

However, Forche maintains her calm, conversational tone as she speaks to the Colonel's alarming demonstration of power. The Colonel gets up from the table and returns with what (keeping with the imagery of everyday objects) appears to be "a sack used to bring groceries home" (16). He then spills human ears—which Forche likens to dried peaches—upon the table. Expressing to his dinner guests that he is "tired of fooling around," he makes a comment regarding his disinterest in talking about human rights, presumably the reason that Forche has visited his home (16). Forche remembers the Colonel's actions in this moment, writing how he picked up one of the ears, "shook it in our faces, [and] dropped it in a water glass" (16). Templeton notes, "As a forceful, sadistic symbol-maker in his own right, the colonel terrorizes his guests, certain that his horrific after-dinner demonstration will confound the poet's expressive power" (48).

However, the idea that this "demonstration" will rob the poet of her means of expressing herself does not correspond with Forche's ideas of poetry of witness. In *Against Forgetting*, she shows while she might have been one of the first to formally categorize the idea of poetry of witness, the act of poetic witness began long before her own lifetime. People like Akmatova saw acts of violence just as frightening or even more jarring than what Forche witnessed. Likewise, while Forche emerged from El Salvador relatively unscathed, many of the poets found within *Against Forgetting* saw their lives and the lives of their family members compromised by the conditions of war and dictatorships. By possessing a strong knowledge of poetic tradition (especially in regards

to witness) Forche is able to draw upon inspiration from those who came before her while creating an understanding that poetry should and can respond to political events, an idea that has been essential to a conceptualization of twenty-first century American poetry.

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